

Myth and the American Stage

I would like to begin my presentation by drawing upon a phrase from Dr. Blasting's paper. He quoted Margo Jefferson that "in myths we are looking for treasures in the form of cultural continuity." History, too, presents cultural continuity, and that is perhaps why to some, myths are often accepted as history. The difference, however, is that history is a retelling of an actual event from a POV of the recorder of that event, while myth, or at least the artistic expression of a myth, is a conscious effort to record what arose from a communal, collective unconscious.

Despite this difference, I believe both myths and history are, to borrow from Ms. Jefferson again "revelations about who we are and what we can or can not change." Although they both teach us about the past, studying history may prevent us from repeating it, while "myths", to quote Elizabeth Lesser, "are great sources of information about how to deal with change."

Jung believes that by describing one's inner reality, myths function as a form of therapy for the problems of humanity. Theatre, too, is believed to be therapeutic. And since myths offer a medium for both education and therapy, it seems that academic theatre is a perfect place for staging myths.

To communicate the lessons of a myth to my contemporary young audiences, therefore, I have often relied on drawing parallels between historical events of contemporary culture and the essence of a myth that is staged, an attempt that some critics, colleagues and audiences have called "cultural exploration of the theatrical text." Following is a brief mention of three of over a dozen such attempts within the past two decades.

Gilgamesh:

In *Gilgamesh Con/Quest*, 1990, written by Ralph Blasting and myself, we attempted to communicate the ideas of abuse of absolute power and the search for immortality to the college theatre audiences by restructuring the events of this ancient myth.

This myth tells the story of a mighty conqueror's unquenchable thirst for power, life and sex, and his search for immortality. Gilgamesh is an unconquerable hero who rises above all men as their favorite king, but he abuses his power by demanding, among other things, that every bride should sleep with him before she is united with her husband. His pride forces him to challenge the gods, and thus he is punished, seeing his beloved friend, Enkido, perish by his side. Realizing his own helplessness in the face of death, he sets out on a journey in search of everlasting youth, and unable to attain that, upon his return he spends the rest of his days ruling as the most just and fair king.

Gilgamesh's search for everlasting youth has a contemporary parallel. Discussions about Cloning, the search for a cure for Cancer, a vaccine for Aids, and the moral implications of Stem-Cell research were among many issues of the day that force us to think about overcoming death and the possibility of eternal life.

The theme of the abuse of power was also ringing a familiar bell not only in my ears, but in the ears of many friends. The Taliban in Afghanistan, the Religious Right in my native Iran, Saddam in Iraq, and the Operation Desert Storm were of this category.

Our adaptation began with a wedding scene that took place many years after Gilgamesh had left his city for a journey to the underworld in search of everlasting youth. During the wedding procession an old man enters claiming, with shaking voice, that the bride is his. This aged intruder turns out to be Gilgamesh, returned from his long journey. Facing mockery and ridicule from the crowd, he recounts his story.

I suggested the wedding as a structural frame because of a contemporary and personal connection. A friend of mine, a theatre director, who was known for his outspoken opposition to the abuse of power by the ruling clerics, was dragged out of his own wedding and executed. His wife imprisoned and raped. This, of course, was and still is normal practice in post-revolutionary Iran. His wedding became a symbolic battleground for unending protests that still exist and, I believe, will someday overthrow this barbaric regime.

As Gilgamesh begins to tell his story, in a flashback, we see another wedding, much similar to this one, but from a time long past, when a young King Gilgamesh could demand the same thing that in his old age provokes scorn. When in defense of his wife the groom opposes the hero's desire, the young Gilgamesh kills him. Enkido, a giant creature, who is brought into the city to challenge Gilgamesh, appears at the door. The two wrestle for several days. Unable to defeat him, Gilgamesh accepts Enkido as his most trusted companion, and together they conquer the Cedar Forest, challenge the goddess Ishtar and destroy the Bull of Heaven.

The critic for Baltimore's City Paper spoke of the structural device of the weddings as one that "makes it unnecessary to find larger-than-life actors to play Gilgamesh." And one that "allows for the ensemble as a unit to portray such giants as Humbaba, the Bull of Heaven and the 12 League of Darkness."

In this production we used many flashbacks and flash-forwards. I often use this device to allow for the audience's mind to wander between the actions of the play and the contemporary events.

Reviewing this production Winifred Walsh of The Evening Sun felt that "the [play's] narration serves as a rich background for the contemporary events." Another critic, R. M. Grau of the Baltimore Alternative noted even more parallels between this myth and the contemporary culture. He writes: "While not about Aids, it is uncanny how it relates to the emotional and spiritual crisis the disease has brought to the gay community." Therefore, judging from these reviews, one could conclude that a significant part of the audience left the theatre meditating on the days events.

I sincerely believe that *Theatre is what happens in the minds of the audience as they leave the building.*

Antigone:

I directed Antigone; A Contemporary Myth, right before the 1992 presidential elections. What in Sophocles' text stood out in my mind was the growth of Antigone from a little girl to a revolutionary woman. She had undoubtedly learned much from her father during their time in exile. What interested me, however, was the life changing choices this little girl made.

I had noticed in the young people I was teaching an indifference, if not an inability, to make choices that would affect their lives as both individuals and members of society. Twelve years of Reagan-rule had impaired their ability to take an active role in their future or make any contribution to the direction their country was taking. They had adopted an "Hakuna Matata" attitude marking a sickening indifference that was apparent in everything they said or did. I wanted to change them, to make them look and listen, to force them to chose.

To that end, I divided the theatrical space into three areas, each separated with a painted path. A green path led into Creon's Palace, a red path led into Antigone's death chamber, and a white path led to the city. Loud speakers played key phrases from presidential candidates' speeches. The audience and the actors, all in street clothes, entered along the white path, as if they were coming from the city to watch an event; they took their seats at one of the three sections separated by these paths. Upon their arrival the actors were directed to improvise conversations with the audience and each other on various issues of the day. These debates grew louder and louder until the actors stripped their street clothes off and began a stylized fight that was meant to represent the battle of Thebes. On some nights audience members tried to intervene and make peace between the fighting parties. Sentences like "You are in a theatre, behave" or "Leave your political views outside" were among the opinions that the audience expressed. In one performance, an audience member actually entered the playing area in an attempt to stop two actors from fighting, thus audience participation took place even before the first scene of the play began.

The chorus was also divided in three groups, one in support of Antigone's action, another favoring Creon, and a third undecided. I choreographed the chorus' movement to a variety of contemporary music, thus creating dance images that the young audience could easily respond to, thus solving pitfall of a motionless but "talkative" chorus.

I had rehearsed the chorus in such a way that each of the three groups knew all the choral parts, so that on any given night, a individual or a choral group would have the freedom to choose their part and affiliation in the debate, thus dynamically and spontaneously taking sides with the characters and issues of the play.

When the play ended (and I should say that in my version I had decided to kill off Antigone and Creon) the white path was blocked and the audience and the actors, now in their street clothes again, were forced to choose the path through which they were to leave the theatre. Some even crossed the stage to choose a different path than the one closest to them.

Antigone is about choice. Life is about choice. The election is about a choice. And in this play, to quote an audience member, “one had no other choice but to make a choice.”

Iphigenia:

Theatre, like all other aspects of our lives, has or should have changed after the unfortunate events of 9/11. The “cultural continuity” of the myths has indeed taken a twisted meaning in our time. Terrorism has instilled such a fear within most of our hearts that many of us do not hesitate to justify killing innocent people in the name of world peace. Today, perhaps more than at any other time in our history, the therapeutic value of theatre is required. Today, perhaps more than at any other time, our American stage is in need of the effective use of world myths.

I was asked to direct Euripides’ Iphigenia At Aulis this past February. Euripides wrote this play “as a commentary on human nature and war” writes Michael Sham, Professor of Classics at Siena College, in the playwright’s notes “at a time that he himself had experienced the defeat of his beloved city.” Euripides himself witnessed this “tragic human experience,” to borrow from Dr. Sham, as Athenian behavior changed to “sheer brutality and vengeance.”

Does this seem familiar? Is Euripides our contemporary?

Dr. Sham highlights the perspective of the Greek historian Thucydides that “history being liable to repeat itself, perhaps the same or similar course of events could be recognized in the future.”

I decided to stage the play within the head of Iphigenia, in the split-second between the moment she sees the executioner’s blade and it severs her throat. I felt that during this time she might be able to foresee the distant future, as far as our age. Didn’t I read that those facing death may be given the power to see into the future?

I asked Dr. Sham to adapt a new version of this myth, a version that while true to the original could communicate to our contemporary audience. He did. We began the play with the ritual of Iphigenia’s sacrifice and ended it with the slaughter of the Trojan Polyxena, the daughter of Priam, and the last virgin slaughtered in the war at the behest of Achilles’ ghost. The stage, a translucent dome upon which video images were projected, represented the girl’s skull. Under this dome, the actors and the audience shared the same playing area with various structures, TV sets and a sacrificial bed that

was mounted over the actual skulls of dead animals. The dialogues, reports, movements, images and sound (to which my colleague Stephan will speak), became a flowing vessel of literal, visceral and visual images that flew, taking the actors and the audience with it, to quote Tim Cahill of the Times Union, “between Athens in 404 B.C. and the present day.” He writes “In a speech that, with a couple of changes, might have been directed at President Bush, Menelaus chides his brother Agamemnon ‘Don’t turn away from the truth... You were so eager to lead the Greeks to Troy, though you tried not to give that impression your desire was fierce.’”

In relating to my contemporary audience the lessons of this ancient myth, that **violence could only produce more violence**, I need go no further than to repeat what Clytemnestra speaks as she kills her murderous husband, Agamemnon. She says “I have dissembled much before this moment to suit my purpose, now I feel no shame to speak the truth. For how else could someone show hatred to hated men who have made a pretense of love.”

Michael Sham speaks for both of us when he says about the adaptation “I think at times my own convictions of the meaning of the play have led me to crystallize too hard, to make too rigid, Euripides’ more fluid drama.” And like him, “I am also guilty of conceit,” and this one I truly believe in “that Iphigenia can still comment on contemporary human conflict, just as it did then”