

Fear and pity: about the tragedy's resurrection in the post-pandemic era

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Abstract: The present article aims to discuss two theatre adaptations of the ancient tragedy as they were interpreted by the British director and playwright Robert Icke: *Oresteia* and *Oedipus*. Introduced in the Romanian theatre landscape by Andrei Șerban, who staged *Oedipus* at the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj, Icke proves to be one of the most interesting recent dramaturgical discoveries. I have chosen to discuss the two plays in relation with the practitioners' option to rethink the tragedy for nowadays audiences. In the context of pandemic and of the war so close to the Romanian borders, the tragedy finds inevitable connections with the contemporary spectators. It ends up being perceived on a deeper emotional level, rather than an intellectual one. This leads us to conclude that we are witnessing a new stage of the rebirth of the tragedy as a genre, from an aesthetic and cultural point of view.

Keywords: adaptations, ancient tragedy, postdramatic theatre, contemporary dramaturgy, performativity

In the recent years we are witnessing a spectacular revival of the tragedy. Whether we are talking about rewritings of the ancient plays, or whether current topics end up being 'translated' in a typical tragic structure, through the appearance of the chorus and the characters' reference to the concept of *hubris* - the practitioners' and their audiences' appetite for the genre becomes indisputable. This is not a random fact: the very recent events offer the feeling of a precipitation of the narrative threat of History, creating political instabilities on a global level and emotional instabilities on a personal one. The pandemic waves, the refugees and the emigrants waves, the Ukrainian war, The Syrian Civil War, the violent protests from Iran, the rise of the far-right parties on an international level, the climate crisis - these are all major facts that make us aware of the fragility of life in an era in which humanity claimed to be invincible. The Mother Nature and the human nature won once more the competition with Man - who thus became aware of his *hubris*.

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If we were to analyze the context of Athenian democracy in a contemporary perspective, we will first notice, as Edith Hall states in her essay, *The sociology of Athenian Tragedy*, that we are dealing with a deeply patriarchal landscape, whose system is based on the inequalities of class, race and gender¹. The tragedy, as a 'product' of this form of government can only function as a support of the ideology that the system is promoting in order to educate the masses. However, the world of ancient tragedy is not the projection of a real society, but the imagining of a utopian world², full of model characters, paradoxes and abstract ideas, along means of entertainment. The relationship between the tragedy and its political context is indisputable and necessary, regardless of the historical era. The (re)imagining of utopia can only exist as a result of a comparison with a society of present times, of contemporary questions and dilemmas, of a modern dialectic. George Steiner affirms that "all men are aware of tragedy in life. But tragedy as a form of drama is not universal"³. This statement is also based on the analysis of the condition of the Tragic Hero, of his/her character and the superior position in the relation to the masses. This is the reason of Marx's rejection of the genre⁴. The tragic hero has no choice but to suffer the punishment caused by the tragic guilt, which he/she could not have avoided since it always hangs over him/her, like a curse. The Supreme Authority becomes indisputable: it is the only one who can decide destinies or an absolution of sins. The Romanian critic Ileana Mălăncioiu considers that the idea of 'tragic guilt' passes beyond the hero's opposition to a norm established by the Absolute, which makes the concept of 'tragedy' survive regardless of the religious context of a community, be it pagan or Christian. She states that the 'tragic guilt' is more often established in relation to the moral law of the hero, which he/she is constrained to break.⁵ In other words, the relationship between the Tragic Hero and its Destiny is, as philosopher

¹ Hall, Edith, *The Sociology of Athenian tragedy* (pp 93-126), from the vol. Easteling, P.E. (edit.) - *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2011, orig. cit.. „The Athenian democracy was a xenophobic, patriarchal, and imperialist community, economically dependent on slavery and imperial tribute, and tragedy has proved susceptible to interpretation disclosing its expression of ideas necessary to the systems's perpetuation, ideas implying the inferiority of foreigners, women and slaves.”, p 93

² Ibidem., p 125

³ Steiner, George, *The death of tragedy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1980, p 3

⁴ Ibidem., p 4

⁵ Mălăncioiu, Ileana, *Vina tragică. Tragicii greci. Shakespeare. Dostoievski. Kafka*, București, Editura Polirom, 2013, orig. cit. „Faptul că Aristotel a folosit acest concept, indiferent dacă teoria sa mai este sau nu întru totul valabilă, dovedește prin sine însuși că se poate vorbi despre vină și în legătură cu tragedia anticilor; (...) vina nu se stabilește în raport cu Providența, cum pare la prima vedere, ci cu legea morală acceptată ca proprie lege și încălcată de către eroul tragic.”, p 137

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Andrei Pleșu puts it, a combination between fatalism and chance. To paraphrase him, if we could do only what we want in life, our freedom would be as boring as the obligation to do only what is imposed on us⁶. The tragic destiny is born not only by a hero's opposing to a divine law or a law of the city, but by making the most difficult choice between two values that are both valid and are both contained by the hero - two values that he cannot challenge. If in Antiquity the representation was directly linked to the mythological element and the relationship of the Transcendent with the Self, with the purpose of masses' education, today it acquires the purpose of activating the critical spirit of the spectators. In short, the theatre's 'duty' is to educate the audience in distinguishing morality from immorality.

The life in Ancient Greece was profoundly performative, as Rush Rehm recalls in *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy And The Modern World*: "When labelling classical Athens a 'performance culture', we point to overlapping areas of public activity - law courts, the assembly, symposia, the gymnasia, the theatre, and so on - that involved performers and audiences shaping and enacting their idea of the city. (...) However, it appears that the 'performance culture' of democratic Athens had no trouble distinguishing the stage world from that outside the theatre, and saw no advantage in blurring the practical and ontological differences between the two"⁷. On the other hand, Paul Cartledge emphasis this fact by pointing out the similarity of the ancient term for 'actor' (*hupokritēs*) with that meaning 'rhetorical debate' (*hupokrisis*)⁸. The most famous example in this matter is the third part of *Oresteia* where we were dealing with the hero's trial - probably representing an example of how law and judgement would have worked in ancient times⁹.

Much closer to the contemporary audience, the linguistic theories elaborated by J. L. Austin, the semiological ones theorized by Saussure, the Freudian

⁶ Liiceanu, Gabriel, Andrei Pleșu, *Despre destin. Un dialog (teoretic și confesiv) despre cea mai dificilă temă a muritorilor*, București, Editura Humanitas, 2020, orig. cit. „(...)dacă am putea face tot ce vrem, tot ce ne trece prin cap, libertatea noastră ar fi la fel de plicticoasă pe cât de plicticoasă ar fi obligația de a face numai ce ni se impune.”, p. 44

⁷ Rehm, Rush, *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy And The Modern World*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, p. 12

⁸ Cartledge, Paul, 'Deep plays'. *theatre as process in Greek Civil Life* (pp 3-35), din vol. Easteling, P.E. (edit.) - *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2011, cit. orig. „In a city peculiarly governed (in both sense) by use of the spoken work in public arenas, Athenian theatre was perhaps predictably dominated by antagonistic debate. *Hupocritēs*, literally 'answerer', was the standard word for actor, and *hupokrisis* was also used to mean non-theatrical rhetorical debate”, p 14

⁹ Ibidem, p. 15

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psychoanalysis, gender politics and performance art - all of these influenced and offered a more complex vision of the term of *performativity*. As W.B. Worthen puts it: "Performance studies has developed a vivid account of nondramatic, non-theatrical, nonscripted, ceremonial, and everyday-life performances, performances that appear to depart from the authority of texts. Both disciplines [n.red.performance studies and literary studies] view drama as a species of performance drive by texts: as a result, drama appears to be an increasingly residual mode of performance."¹⁰ The performativity of life in Ancient Greece was due to the fact that a large percentage of the population was illiterate and therefore, the performance of ideas became a means for them to be communicated to the masses. As a result, the event itself represented an act of manipulation: it would have been inevitable that the message was not conveyed with a clear intention, with the emphasis on certain ideas convenient to the performer who delivered them with a subjective emotion. Therefore, could ancient tragedy have a function of 'awakening' the critical spirit among its audience? Only to the extent that the critical (and civic) spirit supported the ideology of the city. As Augusto Boal reminds us, the revolution had no place in ancient Athenian society (at least not in terms of reception of tragedy). He states that Aristotle's Coercive System of Tragedy still survives present times due to its efficiency of its frightening message sent to the audience: all individuals who oppose rules must be punished. Thus, as Boal concludes, this system cannot be used *during* the revolutionary eras.¹¹

The question is whether we are passing through a revolutionary era or one of reflection? As a theatre practitioner and an interested observer of the latest socio-political events, I tend to consider that we are now experiencing an era of uncertainty caused by a traumatic rupture between a world we thought as 'safe' and a reality with a precarious balance. This vulnerability that we are all feeling is creating a fertile ground for extremist ideologies and vehement narratives, dangerous for the masses wanting to return to a comfort, be it false. Social media algorithms, as well as some mass-media channels affiliated with extremist political parties and personalities are undeniably more effective than theatre on 'shaping' individuals' world views. In our

¹⁰ Worthen, W.B., *Drama, Performativity, And Performance*, PMLA, vol. 113, no. 5, October, London, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 1093 - 1107 (15 pages), pp. 1093-1094

¹¹ Boal, Augusto, *Teatru Oprimațiilor și alte poetici politice*, București, Editura Nemira, 2017, orig. cit.: „Sistemul Tragic Coercitiv al lui Aristotel supraviețuiește și azi grație imensei sale eficiențe. Este, efectiv, un puternic sistem intimidant. Structura Sistemului poate varia într-o mie de forme, făcând uneori greu de descoperit toate elementele structurii sale, dar Sistemul va fi acolo, realizându-și misiunea de bază - curățirea tuturor elementelor antisociale. Tocmai din acest motiv, Sistemul nu poate fi utilizat de grupuri revoluționare *în timpul* perioadelor revoluționare.”, p. 94

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desire to survive in an increasingly frightening world, we resort to the ancient decision of any mammal in a hostile environment: sticking to a group. Therefore, more than ever we are living today in an extremely polarized and divided world in terms of values and spirituality. It is possible that we are passing through a pre-revolutionary era: revolutions, however, are born to replace a reality with another, described as the revolutionaries as `ideal` or at least `better`. And at this point, theatre has an important word to say, as it can function as a rehearsal for a possible change in the real world; and this change is initially born within the individual. What psychotherapy (as an increasingly common practice in society) and tragedy (as a dramatic genre) have in common is that both focus on exploring emotions of fear and pity, understood in their multitude of variants that guide our relation to ourselves and to the others. Their goals differ, therapy being a long-term personal experience that seeks healing, while theater performance evokes feelings in a limited time, out of the desire to convey a message.

The stories of the mythological characters from the ancient tragedies, their characteristics, the curses spread over generations (understood today as transgenerational trauma) represent a template for new mythologies exposed in a multitude of styles, from sci-fi to realistic-psychological, absurd, modernist, postmodernist to dramatic and postdramatic. All of these reflect the creators' need to rethink their own destiny in a larger historical and social context. This is why I believe that tragedy is the ideal artistic expression of the period of reflection that humanity is going through at the moment, and its resurrection was inevitable

In 2015, Almeida Theatre from London announced the Greek Season, consisting in ancient plays adapted, rethought and rewritten in the contemporary context. Among the resulting productions was *Oresteia*, after Aeschylus, a rewriting by Robert Icke in collaboration with Duška Radosavljević¹². In his introduction for this adaptation published by Oberon Books in the same year, Simon Goldhill formulates the stake of this rewriting as a necessity to get closer today to the true

¹² The artistic team of the 2015 production consisted of: Robert Icke (director and dramaturgy), Hildegard Bechtler (design), Natasha Chivers (lights), Tom Gibbons (sound), Tim Reid (video), Julia Horan CDG (casting), Simon Goldhill (academic consultant), Duška Radosavljević (dramaturg), Anthony Almeida (assistant director)

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purpose of theatrical act, valid in the same manner as it was thousands of years ago: that of connecting us and to understand the society and the politics of the moment¹³.

The new version of *Oresteia* is built on four acts, each one presenting an episode from the chain of crimes of the Atreides family. Act One focuses on the death of Iphigenia, which was only mentioned in the original play. Icke's option to insist on this aspect (an actual adaptation of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*) had the purpose to develop the dictatorial personality of Agamemnon. In today's audience's collective imaginary, the image of Agamemnon overlaps that of leaders like Vladimir Putin or Donald Trump (whose rise in the polls was in the attention of the general public in 2015). Moreover, Russia's intervention in the Syrian war in the same year, but also the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, creates a link between the ancient tragedy's context and the contemporary one, offering a greater relevance to the subject. Agamemnon's despotic personality is a threat not only to democracy, but to the life of his own family. His existence is constantly in the sight of cameras and he himself states that he is not a pacifist and the 'Countries run on war'¹⁴. By sacrificing the innocent Iphigenia to win the war he turns into a delusional monster guided in life by questionable prophecies. His murder in the bathroom bears an awful lot of resemblance to Jacques-Louis David's painting, *The Death of Marat* (1793), assassinated by Charlotte Corday. In the light of the presented events, Klytemnestra's decision to take his life is perfectly justifiable: it is not a passionate crime committed by an adulterous wife, but a revenge of a mother widowed of a daughter. The image of the two eagles devouring a pregnant rabbit (premonitory image in the original text) takes on deep meanings in Icke's version.

According to David Cohen, the eagles had a double significance: that of the Atreides House, but also of a symbol for Zeus. The killing of the unborn babies represent both the death of innocence (Iphigenia) and the gods' curse and punishment¹⁵. In the 2015 version, the focus of the terrible image is not on the two

¹³ Aeschylus, Icke, Robert, *Oresteia*, London, Oberon Books, 2015, orig. cit. „The fact that Aeschylus himself was redrafting the old and privileged stories to talk directly to new and insistent politics demands that each new version of his masterpiece speaks to its own modern condition, if it is to be true to the spirit of Aeschylus.”, p. 7

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, Act 1, orig. cit. „AGAMEMNON: (...) I deal in violence: my life is a violent life. Countries run on war. I'm not a pacifist.”, p. 28

¹⁵ Cohen, David, *The Theodicy of Aeschylus: Justice and Tyranny in The 'Oresteia'*, Greece and Rome, vol. XXXIII, no 2, October, London, Cambridge University Press, 1986, pp 129-141 (13 pag), orig. cit.: „(...) the eagles are identified as Atreidae - but the eagle is also the bird of Zeus. This is, of course, appropriate, since they are the agents of Zeus' punishment, but it also means that Zeus is identified

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eagles, but on the hare and its offspring - more clearly, on the *victims* Klytemnestra and Iphigenia. In this direction, the two attacking eagles have as direct correspondents, the king Agamemnon and his son, Orestes. The family's story is built in two times, which take place simultaneously, from a scenic point of view, : the action in the present (Orestes' psychological examination by a doctor in the context of his matricide trial) and the actions in the past (Orestes' troubled and subjective memories). In the play's final act, the debate raised in the trial is whether Orestes committed a premeditated murder, in the fullness of his mental faculties or his actions are a consequence of his traumatic experiences within his family, which make him unable to discern fiction from reality. The note received by Agamemnon, with the encrypted message `Child Killer`, which he interprets as a prophecy, also becomes an evidence in Orestes' murder. The son gives another meaning, that of a `Killer Child`. The repetition of this evidence in the trial throughout the play, introduces a political theme that is highly relevant in today's context: the debate over the female body and rights. In the context of the recent annulment of Roe vs Wade Decision in the USA and the loss of abortion right for millions of women, the issue presented by the lawsuit filed against Orestes is becoming a `hot` topic. Who is the real `Child Killer`? The dictators who start wars out of a chronic self-centeredness or the women who wish to decide their own destiny? Apollo's line in the third part of the original *Oresteia* provides the following answer to this question: „(...) The mother of the so-called child is not/ Parent, but nurse of the young life sown in her./ The male is parent: she, but a stranger to him/ Keeps safe his growing plant, unless fate blight it. (...)”¹⁶ The discussion about the female body, reduced to being a simple `container` for the society's needs, unfortunately returns in the XXIst Century. Canceling a fundamental women's right (that of having an absolute autonomy over one's own body) will not reduce the number of abortions in a community - it will only reduce the safe conditions in which they take place.”Why does the murder of the mother count less than that of the father?”¹⁷, asks Klytemnestra in Icke's *Oresteia*. I consider that as an important aspect which is emphasized in the adaptation: challenging the apparent equality of what we now call a `normal society`. About this social normality, professor Mihaela Miroiu affirms that it is a cultural product created by a part of a community that is in

with the devouring hare with its unborn offspring (only original sin could mar the innocence of the unborn - the deliberate portrayal of destruction of the innocent could not be clearer).”, p. 132

¹⁶ *The Oresteia of Aeschylus*, translated by R. C. Trevelyan, London, Aylesbury, Hazell Watson and Viney Ltd., 1922, p. 142

¹⁷ Aeschylus, Icke, Robert, *Oresteia*, London, Oberon Books, 2015, p 130

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the privileged position to create norms and to qualify something as being normal or not¹⁸. The females in ancient tragedies hold key positions in the initiation and the escalation of the conflict, being the most frequent victims of their passionate feelings. According to Edith Hall, their role as instigators was given by the condition of belonging to the female gender¹⁹. Obviously, nowadays these traditional gender roles must be questioned and debated and a play like *Oresteia* is highly suggestive of this.

In 2022, with the staging of *Oedipus* production directed by Andrei Șerban at the Hungarian State Theatre from Cluj-Napoca²⁰, Robert Icke's work became accessible to the local audiences as well. The practitioners' interest for this classic text and its multitude of rewrites and adaptations is not a coincidence in the post pandemic times. The 21st Century spectator understands on a personal level and can really empathize with the state of crisis, with the urgency of discovering the truth in order to overcome it. Rush Rehm reminds us about the *fear* described by Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* as a state of tension before an imminent evil²¹. The feeling of fear is probably the most frequently encountered in the everyday life of the past three years: fear of death, fear of not having control over one's life, fear of armed conflicts, fear of the future, fear of the breaking news, fear of nature's revenge, and so on. The entire conflict from *Oedipus* is built on the expectations on an imminent evil; the actions took place long before the story unfolds before our eyes, and the destiny is already fulfilled and unchangeable. The truth is revealed gradually, like the pieces of a puzzle that finally find their rightful place. Oedipus' tragedy is not to act, but to accept the facts from the past that could not be avoided - all these in a short amount of time, to deliver the city from disease and death.

¹⁸ Miroiu, Mihaela. *Gândul umbrei. Abordări feministe în filosofie*, București, Editura Polirom, 2020, orig. cit.: „Să observăm însă că ideea de „normalitate” e un produs cultural. Este produsul unei comunități situate istoric - dar nu al comunității luate ca întreg, ci al acelei părți a ei în postura de a diagnostica ceva ca normal sau nu. Este normal ceea ce convine celor aflați în postura de a face norme”, p. 23

¹⁹ Hall, Edith, *The Sociology of Athenian tragedy* (pp 93-126), din vol. Easteling, P.E. (edit.) - *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 106

²⁰ More information about the 2022 production can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.huntheater.ro/ro/spectacol/605/oedipus/> (accessed at 7th January 2023)

²¹ Rehm, Rush, *Radical Theatre: Greek Tragedy And The Modern World*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2014, orig. cit.: „In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines fear as ‘pain or disturbance due to imagining some destructive or painful evil... so near as to be imminent.’”, p. 49

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Icke's 2018 interpretation preserves these elements and recontextualizes them in the present days, during a US election campaign, on the very night the votes are counted. The choice of this space is not accidental: Oedipus is the ideal candidate, the man of the people in a world that is hurting from within. He himself describes his country as having a sick civic body, a country which used to be young and powerful and is now self-destructing. Oedipus is the product of this world, created in its image and likeness. His impulsive promises to voters - (to release his own birth certificate - a direct reference to the controversy of Barack Obama's presidential campaign²² - and to reopen the investigation of Laius' death) - prove to be fatal. His hubris is that of being crushed by the 'virus of sincerity' in a superficial and false world, fascinated by image and publicity more than anything else. Once the truth becomes known to him, Oedipus has a choice: to make it public or not. This personal decision must be taken in record time: everything in the play takes place against the clock, in the background of the counting of votes. At the end of the night, he and his family will face either total glory or eternal damnation - but one thing remains certain, that when the morning comes, their lives will never be the same again. The change hinges on Oedipus' ability to assume his identity in a lucid manner, once he puts the information together. Icke preserves and explores yet another important element of the original text: the irony. Kenneth McLeish affirms the following about this aspect: "In the progression [n.red. of the play] each event is accompanied by its own ironical double, so that everything which happens seems to someone in the action to mean something it does not. (Even the principal metaphor of the play contains its own opposite. When Oedipus is 'blind' to the truth he has his sight; when he achieves full understanding, he blinds himself)"²³. All characters of the play are created on this duplicity that McLeish is describing. Regarding Jocasta's character, her silence becomes an explicable fact once we learn about the background of the relationship she had with Laius. Abused at the age of thirteen by the most powerful man in the state, secretly pregnant, with a traumatic birth in suspicious circumstances, and a child lost by Laius' men in order to remove any evidence of the abuse - Jocasta is a victim. For her, the killing of Laius, accident or not, was a liberating event. In the context of #metoo movement and of the

²² During the US presidential campaign in 2008, there was a false theory that Barack Obama would not have the right to run, as he is not a natural born US citizen. That same year, in June, his birth certificate was made public to prove the validity of his candidacy. More information at the following link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/election-us-2016-37391652> (accessed at 7th of January 2023)

²³ McLeish, Kenneth, Trevor Griffith, *A guide to Greek Theatre and Drama*, UK, Methuen Drama, 2003, p. 93;

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unmasking of a Harvey Weinstein or a Jeffrey Epstein, the image of a sick, misogynistic and abusive masculinity is very vivid in the minds of nowadays' spectators. The feeling of *pity* (understood as empathy) arises in the audience when the Oedipus-Jocasta couple and their descendants suffer from the death of such a monstrous character. To be silent is to lie by omission, and to lie is to defend the memory of a hated man. What all these characters have in common, apart from the blood ties, is the feeling of *fear* we discussed above: the pressure of protecting an image in the face of an unforgiving, cruel and cutting public opinion. If in the past the individuals' execution took place in public squares, nowadays they take place in the virtual environment, with global coverage where they continue to remain buried in archives and search pages. Fear, as Icke's Oedipus affirms at one point in a discussion with Tiresias - fear is greater than hope. I consider that the core of the entire tragic mechanism of the play can be found in this inequality between Fear and Hope.

In the introduction of his analysis about the staging of ancient tragedies in present times, professor Simon Goldhill asks what are the reasons why some classical texts can still be relevant to the contemporary audiences and to their political contexts²⁴? The answer is simple: through the technique of adaptation. In my opinion as a practitioner, the adaptation in theatre is very similar to the art of restoring a famous painting or a monument. The main need is not necessary to create a new form (though it inevitably arises, as the dramatic becomes postdramatic), but to extend the life of an artistic work. In order to do this, a dramaturg needs other tools which, in most cases, go beyond the area of dramatic writing. Discovering the connections between *Then* and *Now*, finding the historical and political relevance of a classical text is an adventure as complex as it is satisfying, an intellectual exercise as much as an artistic one. At the end of the process we come to realize the circularity of human destinies, regardless of the eras in which they happened, cyclicity of history from which, like the tragic heroes, we never get to draw lessons. Elliptical and complex, mythical and political, prophetic and instinctual, the tragedy returns in force in these unstable times we live in, and this fact is neither accidental nor avoidable.

²⁴ Goldhill, Simon, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, SUA, The University Chicago Press, 2007, orig. cit. : „Tragedy is an inherently political genre, and plays like *Antigone* or the *Oresteia* have repeatedly been staged to make a political point in the modern world. But how can plays of the fifth century BC talk to us today? Why do some performances of ancient tragedy seem to have an immense political impact of our contemporary theatre and others seem merely strained and modish?“, p. 3

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