

Coincidence or Convergence? Staniewski's adaptation of the Iphigenia in Tauris.⁽¹⁾

Voltaire, repeatedly encouraged Catherine the Great of Russia to conquer and 'civilize' the 'backward' Roman Catholic Poles and the 'barbarian' Muslims of Crimea. In a letter dated January 1st 1772 ⁽²⁾, Voltaire wishes that he and Catherine could visit the country

“where Iphigenia—in her role as ‘priestess’—used to cut the throats of all strangers in honour of
of
a vile wooden statue, wholly similar to the miraculous Lady of Czestochowa.” ⁽³⁾

The 'Lady of Czestochowa' is also known as the Black Madonna, Poland's most revered religious icon. The same parallel between Artemis and the Black Madonna, is drawn by Staniewski when, on a screen above the action, framed in columns that suggest a Greek theatre, he projects the icon of the Black Madonna, alternating with images of Artemis' statue. Staniewski had been unaware of Voltaire's comparison.



*The Black Madonna is projected behind Dorota Kolodziej as Iphigenia, Gardzienice 2011.
Photo by Krzysztof Bielinski.*

⁽¹⁾ performed in Athens at the Michael Cacoyannis Foundation on 17th and 18th October.

⁽²⁾ Attention to this 'coincidence' was drawn by Professor Edith Hall, the foremost specialist in the reception of the IT. See her forthcoming book on the reception of the Iphigenia in Tauris, published by OUP.

⁽³⁾ Voltaire Catherine II: Correspondance 1763-1778, Texte présenté et annoté par Alexandre Stroeve, (Non-Lieu, Paris 2006) p.233.



*The many-breasted Artemis of Ephesus is projected
behind Agnieszka Mendel as Iphigenia/Artemis, Gardzienice 2011.
Photo by Krzysztof Bielinski*

Equally, when Staniewski substitutes Catherine the Great for Athena in the ending of his adaptation of the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, it is without prior knowledge of the explicit interest which the Empress had shown in the play and in its Crimean setting.

Moreover, in this *deus ex machina* ending, Catherine/Athena holding the hammer and sickle (the emblem of Communism) intones the original inflected Euripidean prologue in the same melodious accents that resonate in the performance space as the audience enter it as the play begins.



Anna Dąbrowska as Catherine/Athena, *Gardzienice* 2011.
Photo by Krzysztof Bielinski.

The prologue, also projected in translation on the screen, is spoken by the scholar Armand d'Angour (4), an expert in ancient Greek pronunciation and music.

It is as if in the space of only one hour, this highly specialized performance—the recitation of Euripidean text --the outcome of over two thousand years of painstaking scholarship (given that Greek tragedy has been studied uninterruptedly since its classical inauguration at Athens) has been through a great theatrical journey to emerge completely transformed yet totally recognizable.

It is not by coincidence that Staniewski made historically-laden juxtapositions between Artemis and the Madonna on the one hand, and between the goddess Athena's 'happy ending' and the Empress Catherine's hammer and sickle on the other.

(4) Jesus College, Oxford University.

The analogies are founded not on superficial equivalences but on the much broader theme of barbarism versus civilization which Staniewski picked up in Euripides' play and which he made palpable through this extraordinary company's repository of skills.

Though scholarship, practice and research are impossible to separate in Gardzienice's theatre practices, in the case of their *Iphigenia in T...* one can say that the paths of scholarly research and of artistic imagination converge to give us glimpses of multiple layers of historical reality.