

IN SEARCH OF THE HEALING THEATRE OF ANCIENT GREECE

Written Project

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For the Jonathan Fox School of Playback Theatre

Toni Horvatin P.O. Box 802 New Paltz, NY 12561 (914) 691-7795

This paper was conceived in a psychodrama training group when I heard Zerka Moreno say that in ancient Greece, theatre was considered a religious ritual. I imagined a "healing theatre of Ancient Greece" separate from "regular" theatre; where Greek physicians might actually *prescribe* theatre as a part of treatment; where whole theaters of sick people (I imagined a dark cave as in Plato's *Republic*) watched a comedy or tragedy and were cured. Perhaps there was something inherent in the whole philosophy of, approach to, and therefore production of ancient Greek theatre as a whole that had a purposeful healing quality. I knew that J.L. Moreno had been influenced by Aristotle's idea of catharsis in formulating his psychodramatic theories. I was drawn by the idea that an entire society might have known theatre of a quality closer to that of psychodrama and Playback Theatre; one which had the intention of bringing harmony, wholeness, freedom from distress, and even cleansing or purification to its participants.

Using that intention as my meaning of healing, I needed a working definition of theatre. An in-depth discussion would be beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say for our purposes that a theatrical event is one whose action communicates a symbolic as well as a mundane meaning; which presents and *represents*.

In my research I have discovered that the theatre of ancient Greece existed within a cultural context vastly different from anything we experience today and should only be examined and accepted on its own terms. In this paper I will describe that cultural context and then the events within the culture where I looked for "healing theatre:" festivals, the mystery cults, and the Temple of Asclepius.

GREEK LIFE AND RELIGION

As historical analyst Ronald Vincent says, "History is created by the interaction of evidence and historian Sources, methods, assumptions--these can be identified or inferred; a historian's quirks of personality are more difficult to ascertain." (Vincent, p.ix) I have encountered a number of "personalities" in my reading for this paper. This is the story as I have heard it.

A certain tribe of shepherds who called themselves Hellenes, came south from the banks of the Danube River and settled in the mountains and valleys of what we now call the Greek peninsula.

Their society consisted of separate independent city-states each having their own form of government. The styles ran the gamut from a monarch designated to act for all to rule by all the citizens of the polis (city-state). In all cases the governing body was responsible to protect the rights of all citizens.

Although they were fiercely independent and often fought among themselves, the Greek citizens did have a common language, and there was a common *spirit* that made them different from their barbaric neighbors, who had always lived under the rule of an absolute monarch or despot.

That spirit would not tolerate slavery to an irresponsible ruler who thought himself a god. This was displayed very graphically after the defeat of Athens by Sparta in 403 B.C. and the attempted imposition of rule by a bloodthirsty group called "The Thirty Tyrants." It lasted only the few months it took for democratic forces to rally themselves back into power. (Kitto, p.153)

Here is an elaboration from H.D.F. Kitto's *The Greeks*:

. . . the Greeks had developed a form of polity. . . which both stimulated and satisfied man's higher instincts and capabilities. . . the city-state, originally a local association for common security, became the focus of a man's moral, intellectual, aesthetic, social and practical life, developing and enriching these in ways in which no form of society had done before or has done since. Other forms of political society have been, as it were, static; the city-state was the means by which the Greek consciously strove to make the life both of the community and of the individual more excellent than it was before. (p.11)

Citizenship was a central focus of Greek life, and being a good citizen involved all aspects of life, including religion.

"Greeks were involved with religion to a degree which is very hard nowadays to understand." (Muir, p.194) To experiment with this idea, think of almost any aspect of the Judeo- Christian/Mohammedan experience, and see how the Greek experience is different: sacred "Word of God" text? None. Prophets? No. Ten commandments? None. Creed and dogma? No. Authoritative body which defines laws and decides what is correct and incorrect? Non- existent. No heresies, no wars of religion to convert the infidel or the heretic. Instead of a formal institutionalized body called "priesthood," citizens were elected by drawing lots. They watched over the religious activity of the community for a year or less. A number of men and women were involved in the care of the temples, however they were not permanent priests and priestesses.

Following from what we now know of Greek character, this description from John Gould is not surprising:

. . . for all its weight of tradition..., Greek religion remains fundamentally improvisatory. ... though the response to experience crystallizes, on the one hand as ritual, on the other as myth, and both involve repetitions and transmission from generation to generation, there is always room for. . . the introduction of new cults and new observances: Greek religion is not theologically fixed and stable, and it has no tradition of exclusion or finality: it is an open, not a closed system. There are no true gods and false, merely powers known and acknowledged since time immemorial, and new powers, newly experienced as active among men and newly-acknowledged in worship Not bound to forms hardened and stiffened by canonical authority, but mobile, fluent and free to respond to a changing experience of the world. (Gould, p.8)

This was a religion that grew from the farmer settlers, who ordered their world against chaos by means of nature spirits, daemons, and gods. They made gods of those elements which were basic to survival and of those which threatened that survival -- not the gods of Olympus, except as they were manifest in the elements; Zeus as god of weather and hurler of thunder, Poseidon as god of water and earthquakes, Demeter, the Corn goddess, Dionysus, the god of wine.

The basic element of the Greek religion was the cult (here I caution 'the reader to abandon 20th century images!). Essentially, it means the act of worship of certain gods within the household or within the community. The head of the family was the priest of his house and the head of the polis was the high priest for as long as he held office. "From the beginning, religion and society, or the state, were not two separate entities among the Greeks but two closely related aspects of the same entity." (Nilsson 1940, p.80) There could be other more private cults centered around sacred places designated by as little as a stone altar in the forest, and presided over by the family that owned the land.

In summary, the life and religion of the Greeks was based on an independence of spirit that did not bow to monarchs or gods. The one was inseparable from the other, and in both they strove for excellence.

FESTIVALS

Festivals were the single most important feature of classical Greek religion in its public aspect. (Cartledge, p.98) They were the central expression of piety in a religion that did not pledge allegiance to one god or one dogma. They followed the natural cycle of the farmer's year, with its "alternations of anxiety and relief." (Muir, p. 204) The emphasis was on *doing*, not believing. Thus there were, among others, festivals for autumn sowing (fertility), threshing, harvest, and blessing and ceremonial drinking of the new wine. These had the basic form of procession, sacrifice, and feasting, enhanced with many local variations. (Cartledge, p.100, Nilsson 1940, pp.22-41)

The seeds of tragedy and comedy, watered by the particular spiritual and social nature of the people, began growing here. The stories of the local heroes would be sung by a chorus. "Tragedy" is said to have come from the festivals of Dionysus, one of whose names is "Melanaigis," which means "he with the black goat skin." The Greek word for goat is "tragos" and singer is "oidos." (Van Loon, p. 64) It is pure speculation after that as to what form, if any, the "tragos-oidos" took. Comedy is said to have grown from the "komos" (procession) held at the Rustic (or Rural) Dionysia, one of the Attic country festivals. Phallic symbols (Dionysus was also the fertility god) were paraded on high and the carriers called out jokes, insults and funny songs. (Amott, p.26, Pickard-Cambridge, pp.42-43, Nilsson, p.36)

As industry and commerce began to be developed in certain *poleis*, populations shifted there also. In the classical age the cities took over parts of the old rural religion, and festivals were also modified. However, as Paul Cartledge tells us, "... even the most secularized festival never lost touch entirely with its religious roots. Sacred things could not be treated as profane, and festivals took place in a precinct dedicated to some god and were accompanied by sacrifices." (Cartledge, p.102)

The rustic local deities became the "great gods" of the city, and the poets and artists, not theologians, were the ones who presented them and nurtured their development. (Nilsson 1940, pp.84-85) .

There are several Greek words for "festival:" *heorte*, meaning amusement/entertainment or religious festival (showing the event's dual role), *fe/ere*, a festival of initiation rites (the mystery cults), and *agon*, "contest," used for festivals which involved competitions.

Most pertinent to this discussion is the City Dionysia in Athens, which was a competition of performances of dramatic and lyric poetry. The action took place on a circular playing area (not unlike the threshing floor) -- the *orchestra* -- on a hill of the Acropolis. Before the actual competition there were two days of processions, purification, and sacrifices. (Pickard- Cambridge, pp.57-101, Cartledge, p.120) The next day the likes of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes competed with their peers before the spectators (*theatai*). The leader of the festival chose the playbill and leading actor for each production. The word for this latter was *protagonistes*, or "first competitor" (note our word "protagonist"). He alone of the actors was eligible for a prize.

"He" is the appropriate word for *protagonistes*, because women did not play in the dramatic festivals and there is a question as to whether they even attended, (Cartledge p.127, Pickard- Cambridge, p.263) although Kitto makes a good argument that they did. (Kitto, p.233) Women were involved in the processions, and there were several primitive festivals in which they participated exclusively.

The playwrights had to apply to the festival leader for a chorus, which was supplied by the *choregoi*, a wealthy citizen who was required by Athenian law to do this extra service. He paid for the chorus, the aulis player, found a chorus trainer, and provided a post-performance feast. In Greek "drama" means "something done," meaning the plays were heard, not read, and the playwright was said to "produce" or "teach" them, rather than write them. (Cartledge, p.123) I am relating these details to give a sense of the event and how, within the religious ritual, a secular form was also taking shape. Regarding the ultimate separation of actor from chorus, given the improvisatory nature of the Greek religion, it is not hard to imagine an actor moving spontaneously out of the chorus. From that move came the evolution of the sacred space from a single circle to actors being raised on platforms above the chorus, and ultimately, to the extinction of the chorus.

How were the festivals healing? As a religious event they offered a chance, as Plato says, for "men... to be made whole again" by sharing a day of rest with the gods Dionysus and Apollo and the Muses. (Cartledge, p.101); the quality of competitive excellence that was encouraged in the performances edified both gods and men. (Cartledge, p.103) Finally, because they touched a chord that echoed back to their roots in the rustic tradition:

. . . the great mystery, human life, was presented through the power of great art. Poet and actors and audience were conscious of a higher presence. They were gathered there in an act of worship, all sharing in the same experience. The poet and the actors did not speak to the audience; they spoke *for* them... .Plato said the perfect state was one -in which the citizens wept and rejoiced over the same things. That deep community of feeling came to pass in the theatre of Dionysus. Men lost their sense of isolation. (Hamilton, p.216)

This is the religious context for the experience of catharsis.

MYSTERY CULTS

"The religion of the drama brought men into union with one another. The religion of the mysteries was individual, the search for personal purity and salvation. It pointed men toward union with God." (Hamilton, pp. 216- 217)

The mystery cults had to do with personal catharsis. They were initiation rites devoted to various gods or goddesses -- for example, in Athens the Elusinian mysteries of the goddess Demeter and her daughter Kore (Persephone), and the Bacchic mysteries of Dionysus.

Contrary to the religion practiced by all, the mysteries were an expression of individual longing for "an immediate encounter with the divine." (Burkert 1987, p.90) Initiates voluntarily passed through a personal experience that involved specific ritual and secrecy. The oath of secrecy was well-kept. Although there seems to be quite a lot of description of the preliminary rites, as Burkert says, even if we did know the details they might sound underwhelming. For example, Burkert tells about a Christian writer whose expose was: "The Athenians celebrating the Elusinian mysteries, show to the epoptai [initiates] the great, the admirable, most perfect epoptic secret, in silence, a reaped ear of grain." (Burkert 1987, p.91) As Burkert points out, without the context of warmup, we can only offer flights of imagination as to what happened.

Nilsson makes the point that "the highest mystery was something shown and something seen," (Nilsson 1940, p.43) and the object was secondary to what it represented. In this there is a parallel to theatre in that, as we've said, art presents and represents, and there is something evocative in the unseen. Several sources point out that 'hardly anything is known about the backdrop to Greek plays, so possibly people

were very used to experiencing the unseen. (Amott, pp.13-14, Southern, pp.118-120). As Amott says, "the audience's imagination set the play." (Amott, p.34)

The few extant firsthand accounts of mystery rites give us a flavor of what happened, but are elusive enough to tell us nothing so as not to betray their secrets: "I approached the frontier of death, I set foot on the threshold of Persephone, I journeyed through all the elements and came back, I saw at midnight the sun, sparkling in white light, I came close to the gods... and adored them from near at hand."; "I escaped from evil, I found the better." (Burkert 1987, pp.96-97)

There is no evidence that presented drama was part of the mysteries. It sounds as if the initiates were involved in their own immediate dramas. Whether healing occurred we can only speculate.

ASCLEPIUS AND THE TEMPLE OF DREAMS

Asclepius is one of the examples of "improvisation" in Greek religion. By some accounts he arose out of the rustic hero cults. Homer mentions him in *The Iliad* as being aboard the Argos. It is unclear whether he was a god for whom myths were invented or a hero whose deeds gave him the stature of a god. Supposedly he was born of the god Apollo and the mortal woman Coronis, and abandoned to the care of the centaur Chiron, who taught him about healing. He was a doctor, teacher of Hippocrates, and said to embody the perfection of the craft. Asclepius is the most enduring of the Greek gods. He was still an important figure when Greek and Roman cults were dying out. Some say that "in the final stages of paganism, he was considered the foremost antagonist of Christ." (Edelstein & Edelstein, pp. vii-viii) One final impressive claim to fame: from Plato's *Phaedo* 118A: "He [sc., Socrates] said -- and these were his last words -- 'Crito,' he said, 'we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay it and do not neglect it.'" (Edelstein & Edelstein, p.296)

The most famous temple of Asclepius was at Epidaurus. Suppliants would come to the Asclepieia, do the prescribed purification rites (which were far simpler than for many other deities), and then they would be led into the Abaton, where they would recline and sleep. The formal name for this procedure is "incubation," from "incubare," "to sleep in the sacred precinct." (Meier, p.58) The ritual always took place at night. In the course of the night, the god would come to them, in a dream or a vision, and cure them or give them a "prescription," e.g., some actions to perform. Some non-believers were cured. Sometimes it took more than one time even for the believers. People paid for treatment only according to their means. (Meier, p.66)

When the person was healed they were asked to make a stone tablet inscription as a testimony. Some time ago, the stone tablets from Epidaurus were found and studied. Edelstein and Edelstein have published some of the actual inscriptions, both in the Greek and in English. They say of the tablets: "... the data revealed through them completely revolutionized the views commonly held as to the character of divine healing; views which before the excavations started had of necessity been based on literary evidence alone." (Edelstein & Edelstein, p.xi) Here are some examples of testimonies:

Three-year's pregnancy. Ithmonice of Pellene came to the Temple for offspring. When she had fallen asleep she saw a vision. It seemed to her that she asked the god that she might get pregnant with a daughter and that Asclepius said that she would be pregnant and that if she asked for something else he would grant her that too, but that she answered she did not need anything else. When she had become pregnant she carried in her womb for three years, until she approached the god as a suppliant concerning the birth. When she had fallen asleep she had a vision. It seemed to her that the god asked her if she had

not obtained all she had asked for and was pregnant; about the birth she had added nothing.. although he had asked if she needed anything else But since now she had come for this as a suppliant to him, he said he would accord even it to her. After that, she hastened to leave the Abaton, and when she was outside the sacred precincts she gave birth to a girl. (Edelstein & Edelstein, pp. 229-230)

Heraieus of Mytilene. He had no hair on his head, but an abundant growth on his chin. He was ashamed because he was laughed at by others. He slept in the Temple. The god, by anointing his head with some drug, made his hair grow thereon. (Edelstein & Edelstein, p.233)

Euhippus had had for six years the point of a spear in his jaw. As he was sleeping in the Temple the god extracted the spearhead and gave it to him into his hands. When day came Euhippus departed cured, and he held the spearhead in his hands. (Edelstein & Edelstein, p.232)

Sometimes the person was not healed immediately, but had to follow a prescription:

. . . when the harbor waves were swollen by the south wind and ships were in distress, I had to sail across to the opposite side, eating honey and acorns from an oak tree, and vomit; then complete purification is (sic) achieved." (Edelstein & Edelstein, p. 206)

There is no record that anyone was given a prescription to attend the theatre, but there was a great festival at Epidaurus every year in honor of Asclepius which included gymnastic and musical contests and the playing of comedy and tragedy, so it seems they were valued. It is interesting to note that in Athens, the main festival of Asclepius was held on the day preceding the City Dionysia, the drama festival mentioned earlier. (Edelstein & Edelstein, p.207) Regarding the theatre, here is a testimony from some healers who followed in Asclepius' path:

" . . . and not a few men, however many years they were ill through the disposition of their souls, we have made healthy by correcting the disproportion of their emotions. No slight witness of the statement is also our ancestral god Asclepius who ordered not a few to have odes written as well as to compose comical mimes and certain songs (for the motions of their passions, having become more vehement, have made the temperature of the body warmer than it should be) " (Edelstein & Edelstein, p.209)

The case for the fact or fiction of the cures is presented in detail by Edelstein & Edelstein. In this instance it is important to remember our context. In the world of ancient Greece, the visit of the god to these people in dreams was accepted "as a matter of course and as a necessary consequence of the existence of the gods From every point of view, Asclepius' cures, performed continually in the Asclepieia, were well within the limits of the world which the . ancients recognized as real." (Edelstein & Edelstein, p.158)

Two modern-day therapists use the validity of the Asclepian cures to make their own points:

Blomkvist, a therapist and psychodramatist, looks at Asclepius as the god of the mystery of healing and cautions that if the therapist tries to take on this role, they usurp from the patient the ability to become their own healer (Blomkvist, pp.41-42) C.A. Meier echoes the opinion that there may have been no ambiguity in the cures of Asclepius, but in his experience if patients need "the religious element" for their cure, they must find it by themselves *in* themselves. ". . . the analyst can do no more than cautiously accompany the patient or, at the most, guide him." (Meier, p.126)

CONCLUSION

My original definition of healing theatre talked about an event which had actions which present and *represent*, and whose intention it is to make whole or sound, to free from distress, and to cleanse or purify.

Given this definition, it would seem that the festivals, mystery cults, and the temple of Asclepias would qualify as examples of healing theatre at least by their intention. As we've seen, the general spirit of Greek life aimed toward wholeness and excellence and this was reflected as well in these their religious observances.

Although the Asclepian healings are actually documented, I think to say that the festivals or mystery cults were any less, or were not healing would be pure speculation. Hamilton has given us a picture of the emotional catharsis that was possible at the festivals, further evidenced by Cartledge: ". . . Athenian audiences... wept openly, they applauded, hissed, booed, ate noisily, banged the wooden benches with their heels, threw food at the actors, as and when the mood took them." (Cartledge, p.12?) We know little about the ultimate experience of the initiates in the mystery cults, but from what we have, it seems that the potential was there for all of the qualities of healing we have mentioned.

Healing notwithstanding, can we call these events "theatre?" Using the idea of an event whose action presents and *represents*, the City Dionysia presented the purification rituals, sacrifices, and drama and represented union with the gods and with each other. The mystery cults presented specific activities and objects and represented the unseen -- individual communion with the divine. People presented themselves to the god Asclepius in the temple, representing a longing for purification, wholeness, and union with the god.

The "healing theatre of ancient Greece" in these three forms gives me an understanding of my theatrical ancestors. The early Greek farmers and their descendants needed to somehow express the "alternations of anxiety and relief" in the cycles of their lives -- in so doing they were acknowledging a timeless human condition. As I stand upon the Playback stage I express those same feelings for myself and others. From ancient Greece to today, although we are centuries and cultures apart, I now know the connection.

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