

University Classical Plays

**a podcast with guest presenter David Bullen interviewing:
Lewis Bentley, Elena Bashkova, Zoë De Barros, Marcus Bell,
and Alison Middleton
introduced by Giovanna Di Martino**

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Giovanna Di Martino

Hello, everybody. Welcome back to this holiday special. Today we are focusing on the university classical play tradition. So we have here with us the creative teams of both UCL and Oxford. I'm very pleased that to lead the conversation will be David Bullen. So David is a writer, director and dramaturg and he's currently a teaching fellow in the department of Drama, Theatre and Dance at Royal Holloway. In 2011, he co founded By Jove Theatre Company, a socialist feminist collective, that retells old stories new ways for contemporary Britain. His adaptations of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes have been performed in the UK and in the US. He is currently working on a book on Greek tragedy in 21st century British theatre for Liverpool University Press and he's a visiting research associate at King's. So David, over to you.

David Bullen

Thanks, Giovanna. Thanks so much. I'm really I'm delighted to be here. This is great. This is fun, what a festive treat to be here after this crazy pandemic inflicted term, It's so lovely to hear to be talking about theatre of all things, one of the things we've really lost in the last couple of months. But actually, that loss is sort of our subject today, because some the things we may have lost but other things we have gained. I work on the King's College London Greek Play - and this hasn't been publicly announced yet - but we are doing a really exciting project this year, where we're not just staging *Antigone* or *Oedipus the King* or whatever Greek play you'd like, in the original Greek or in

translation, the students are working together to generate their own new adaptation of a play. Which is really exciting. And - not to advertise King's - but I think that actually is really a good context, because both of the other UCL and the Oxford teams are doing really exciting new things with the Greek play projects that have been fairly traditional for the last couple of decades, or maybe even pushing to centuries for some of us. So can I just ask the UCL team - hi, everyone, hi - can you tell us a little bit about what you're doing this year and what what's changed?

Lewis Bentley

Hi. I'm Lewis, the director of the UCL Classical play and we're doing Homer's *Odyssey* this year, we've adapted a translation from Emily Wilson's fantastic text. It's very, very exciting, I think, the fact that this is so different from what one would expect from a Classical Group play or Classical play. But it's very exciting. I guess I should pass on to my team as well - so to Ellie.

Elena Bashkova

Yeah. Hi, I'm Ellie and I'm the producer of the *Odyssey*. As Lewis said, we are doing *Odyssey* by Emily Wilson. I think the reason why we decided to go with the *Odyssey* is just because it hasn't been done before at UCL, or any other university that I've heard of and we saw that, particularly this year, it might be nice to do something a bit more exciting than usually has been produced.

Zoë De Barros

Yeah, hi, I'm Zoë, the assistant director. I think the *Odyssey* has definitely presented challenges in terms of reimagining so much land, so much territory and so much space that it takes place in. But I think we've gone with a really physical theatre approach, trying to include multimedia techniques. So it's just been really wonderful to try reimagine the setting in a really new way, I suppose. It's been great.

David Bullen

How fantastic. I know that at the APGRD there's been a project looking at performances of epic for the last couple of years. I'm sure Fiona and Justine, who wrote a wonderful book recently, are going to be kicking themselves that they missed this out, that they weren't able to include this, because this is so interesting! And interesting that the UCL Greek Play tradition, as you say, has been doing some interesting things in translation for the last couple of decades. You're now, in some ways, going back in time - Greek time - to before the invention of tragedy, to epic, to staging that - and I think that's so interesting, to bring that to audiences. Because, of course, the Athenians would have been very familiar with performances of the *Odyssey*. What a great translation to be adapting, to be working from, as well. So, now, can I also ask the Oxford team to tell us a little bit about it? I know that your project is shrouded in mystery, so tell us what you can. Mysteries are appropriate for a Classics podcast, are they not? Without giving away any of your divine secrets, could you just please induct us into what you can?

Marcus Bell

Hi, I'm Marcus. I'm doing a PhD on choreographing tragedy, and I'm one of the directors of the Oxford Greek Play, which is now a series of Eleusinian Mysteries instead of an actual tragedy. So we're doing *Orestes*. Originally, we were planning to do this, I believe, in early November of this year and so it's kind of like we're marking the month after which the play was going to have been performed, it's now going to be pushed back. We're looking to have something go out - in a very virtual way - in the summer term, or around the summer term, of 2021. But yeah, we're really excited about how this process has been developing because it's given us space and time to work with some really exciting translators, which I think we're going to get to talk about a bit.

Alison Middleton

Hi, I'm Alison, I'm the other director of the Oxford Greek Play, there's only two of us. We're doing Euripides' *Orestes* - we're really excited to be doing a play that isn't performed so much. It's a bit weird - it came kind of right at the end

of your Euripides' writing career, right towards the end of the Athenian Empire, Athenian democracy and it's just a super chaotic play. I'm doing a PhD on laughter and tragedy and this is a play that is pure chaos, humour and quite an apocalyptic play, which feels very fitting for 2020. I should probably mention that the project was originally called *Orestes 2020*, but sadly, now, it's been postponed to 2021.

David Bullen

Like so much of life that has been postponed to 2021 as a result of this year. That's so interesting. Again, different to UCL in the sense that UCL are bringing back the *Odyssey* - as if the *Odyssey* ever went away, but, you know, they're staging something that's different from the usual plays they're staged. In the last couple of years there's been a lot of pressure on university Greek plays, that are increasingly focused towards schools, to stage the big name tragedies, like *Antigone* and *Frogs* - okay, that's a comedy, but you know what I mean. Last year, UCL and King's had our '*Frogs Off*', both doing *Frogs* in the same year. But you know, we've been staging the same kind of plays. It's so great to have the *Odyssey* being saved, but one of these underperformed plays - actually one of my favourite of Euripides' plays, such a bitter play and so appropriate for for this year. So I guess we've already begun to discuss this, but the pandemic has clearly shaped to these projects in major ways in the sense that we wouldn't be doing what we're doing, if it wasn't for the pandemic - which is not to say we're grateful for the pandemic. But I just wondered if the teams could reflect a little bit about, perhaps how and why some of these decisions came about? And what particular pressures did the pandemic put on? What did it reveal or expose about your existing projects that might have led to you going, "Okay, do you know what we're gonna try something different this year?" Does someone from the UCL team want to take this first?

Lewis Bentley

Yes, I think the main thing was, both mine and Zoë's background was in physical theatre. So a lot of that had to be drawn back, so to say, because of

the social distancing that had to be in place, but in the same way it enabled us to really go into different medias. So we were able to use film a lot more and we were able to create our own sort of physical theatre in effect, rather than using complicité or anything like that, we're able to create our own physical theatre techniques and think about how they can be socially distanced, in their sense. I think also - a Peter Brook quote here - "A man can take an empty stage and so long as there's someone watching it, it doesn't matter where the space is, it's still theatre and it's still drama in its essence". That really is the key thing, that no matter how drama or theatre is performed, it doesn't have to be on a stage, it can be in any medium whatsoever. It's still theatre, as long as someone else is watching it. That is the key thing. I know Zoë's done some really cool stuff with the actors and I know you want to talk about Aeolus, for example.

Zoë De Barros

Yeah, I think the social distance - when it comes to choreographing something - is definitely something that we had to take into consideration, but then also creates some really beautiful images in itself. That, I think, was always surprising because you want to have the freedom of choosing proximity or distance. But in a way, it was almost like you were given an answer: it will have to be distant. It was more mysterious in a way, I We did a lot of Aeolus's scenes where we played with wind. I think that's something else that was really brilliant about the social distance of the choreography is that we had to play with elements, we had to play with the elemental changes in the play and the mediums of water and air. With Aeolus we played around with plastic bags and passing the wind from from plastic bag to bag and that was really cool. I don't think we ever would have really experimented with that if we hadn't known that it had to be something quite spaced out. So yeah, definitely a positive that came from that.

Alison Middleton

That's so interesting. The French director Ariane Mnouchkine talks about the 'corset' that you have to put on a piece of work and that that 'corset' might be

restrictive in some sense, but it gives you the shape to which you then can create and it's within that framework that's actually so generative, it's productive. So it sounds actually as if the pandemic has helped create a kind of 'corset' for your project and it's so interesting. But with the *Odyssey*, of course, you've got so much fantasy to stage, you've got so much that we wouldn't normally get in the dramaturgy of a Greek tragedy, certainly - maybe some Greek comedy gets there. Can you tell us about Charybdis? Can you tell us about these things, are you able to give us some spoilers? Tell us what you can.

Lewis Bentley

Yes, for Charybdis - the whirlpool - for example, we've had many ideas and they're all scattered in the air at the moment because we're wondering what is allowed on the actual day of performance. But a lot of it is using fabrics and using the actors' physicality. So how can we get these sailors not to be transformed into this Charybdis, but to be affected by Charybdis? How do we portray them having been involved in a whirlpool? It's a similar sort of idea with the sirens. Rather than having these physical actors, sirens, who are trying to overtake the sailors, how do we have the sailors showing they are being overtaken by the sirens? Flipping it on its head and thinking about how are they being affected rather than who's affecting them. We're also using a lot of Laban's movements, Laban's efforts - or anything about, as an actor, how are they feeling, what are the different spaces, different times. We're using a lot of different theatre practitioners to really bring out this physicality within our actors, which they're appreciating at the moment.

David Bullen

That's so wonderful, I'm so glad to hear that this project is inviting some really interesting and deep engagement with some theatre making processes, that's fantastic to hear. I was really struck by what you said about the ambiguities of what's actually going to be allowed on the day and I wondered if we can use that to kind of turn back to Oxford, because I know that you're the project that was I think, in some ways, the most disrupted by the pandemic

immediately, because, as you said, it was meant to be earlier this year. So there was no ambiguity, in some ways, about what you could and couldn't do - you just couldn't do it, you know? So can you tell us a little bit more about how the pandemic has kind of shaped the process for you.

Alison Middleton

So lockdown actually began probably about a month before, we were meant to be hosting auditions. To get the show ready to go up in November, we had a plan set out, we had an amazing team on board - who are all still on board at this current moment, who are all incredible and have been with us throughout, having to constantly adapt. We were saying the play has been a bit like this prehistoric animal that just has to keep adapting to survive, it's like some kind of deep sea sponge or something. But yeah, it's been really tricky. Because obviously, we were really getting ready and ramping up and beginning to commission people to work on different sections. So like set, lighting and we're beginning to have all these practical discussions, and then the pandemic hit and obviously no one was sure for a really long time, whether it was sensible just to postpone for a couple of months or whether it was kind of a cancelling situation. So we've been playing it by ear for quite a long time. But now finally, we feel like we're in a position to be able to make some absolute decisions about what we are and are not able to do, which has been positive.

David Mullen

Great. That's so interesting. It keeps making me think, we know that there were plays going on in Athens at various points. I wonder to what extent was that there was this ambiguity, you know, served up to Euripides&Co.were they saying "you might go on you might not" I wonder?I wonder how the decisions of those Athenian government members reflect on our government - I don't know. But anyway, let's not get into that, maybe that's too much. Does anyone else have anything to add - Marcus or Elena Do you have anything to add about this, about any of the pressures that have shaped the project?

Elena Bashkova

Yeah, I could maybe jump in and say that because we don't really know whether there will be any more lockdowns in the future and what tier exactly London will be it when our play will be performed, we've taken a decision to make our play film based. So, as opposed to performing it on stage and having a live audience, what we decided is that we're going to film certain scenes and then put it all together into film. This way, by streaming this film, we could reach a much wider audience than we usually would be able to. So instead of schools coming in from nearby London, we would actually be able to reach students or general audiences, even outside of the UK,

David Bullen

That's so interesting. Again, the ability to turn to film in this time and use that to interact with what normally would be a purely theatrical processes is so interesting. Marcus, did you have anything you wanted to add to that?

Marcus Bell

I was just thinking exactly about what what Elena was saying, in regards to that idea of working with film and that process of beginning with this medium. We found - along the way of reforming, reshaping or trying to find the gap into which this this project could fit, the modes of theatrical process that we could work in - that film would be something that could be really exciting. We actually went through a whole stage of planning and scripting. Friend of the podcast, Estelle Baudou, gave a little advice to us on dramaturgy, because this was something that was new to us, working with these ancient texts. So we have this whole film planned out. I mean, really, we started to embody, in a kind of terrifying way, some of the modes of *Orestes*. It's this play in which these people are facing up to this horrible set of circumstances that is partly outside of their control, partly driven by the gods, but also partly, they've made decisions that have led to these chaotic instances. I'm not saying that Allison, and I decided to, overthrow a government, or kill our mothers, or capture Helen, or any of this kind of stuff. But we have all of these potential projects that like are living within this process and I think that's something that we're

trying to work with at the moment. We always wanted to do something that used movement - this project came out of the 'Beyond the Text' workshop with Struan Leslie and Mary-Louise Crawley. I'm a dancer and choreographer and that's the mode that I normally work in, so we really wanted to engage in the project in this way. So the film felt like a really great idea and unfortunately, that isn't going to be possible for us in the way that we hoped it to be. But we're going to still want to work with these virtual modalities or modes of doing theatre. I think one of the things that I'd just like to add as well, is that we're trying to find a way at the moment, to respect, to take care of, to use this repertoire of material that all of the incredible people in our team have been developing. How do we keep hold of that all of the work that we did you know, over zoom calls in lockdown in June, all of the plans or the costume designs, all of the music? We have music from our incredible composer Björn - how do we take care of that, keep hold of that and also make something that that works within the virtual performance practices that have been developed by people like *Theatre of War*? Because you're talking about the Plague of Athens and how theatre went on and that's something that I think they engage with in their production of Oedipus. But also something that I think *By Jove* have engaged with - I should also probably note that I do work with *By Jove* as an Artistic Associate so I can't pretend to be doing an objective plug here. But yeah, *By Jove* engage with these at home theatre practices, thinking about how to stage midday on on YouTube. So we're trying to work in that mode. I mean, this was a long ramble, but I feel like that's what this process is felt a bit like.

David Bullen

Well, I'm just so glad that you in amongst the pressures that have been placed on the Oxford project this year, neither Marcus nor Alison have decided to kidnap anyone or burn the building down as Orestes, and Electra and Pylades decide to do in that play. We'd have to end up with Oliver Taplin coming down as Apollo to sort it all out I think, to tell you to just do the *Eumenides* - or *Orestes at Athens* as Oliver has it. This is this is great. Now, in February, Kings did a play, which was a mash-up of *Bacchae* and *Frogs* and it was apocalyptic

- it was about the future. Only a few weeks later, we went into lockdown. I'm not saying that King's predicted the future, we didn't not predict the future in that production. But in any case, one of the things that was really exciting about that project was the fact that, quite separate to the pandemic, we had been deciding at King's that we wanted to do something a little bit different after 70-odd years of staging plays in Greek. That project involved you know, students devising their version of *Frogs* - that portion of the play - with a little help and shaping from me. But broadly, it was led by them and that was hugely exciting for me as a theatre maker because that's the mode that I work in, as Marcus knows, our work in *By Jove* is very much driven by devising driven by collective creation, rather than 'one person writes a play and we just stage it'. So that was that was really fulfilling for me artistically. It strikes me from the things that everyone has been saying here that, actually, while there are lots of pressures, lots of worries, lots of problems with this process, because of the anxieties of the pandemic, there's some really exciting things going on. There's really exciting opportunities here to bring in disciplines and skills and ideas to bear that perhaps normally wouldn't get a look in, in these kinds of projects. So I wondered if - perhaps we can start this time with with Oxford and go to UCL - if we could talk about what's got you most excited about this project? What the thing that's been most fulfilling for you in terms of the unexpected surprises of this new pandemic version of the Greek play?

Alison Middleton

Yeah, sure. Thanks, David. I think for us, it would definitely have to be our translation process. So one thing that the pandemic did buy us was a lot more time than we had intended to spend on the project. Obviously, we were going to go up in November - it's December now and we're still working on it. We've been working on the show for a year plus now. It's the never ending show! But we were kind of looking at some potential transitions to use as surtitles while we perform the plain Greek, which were all quite expensive, but then when we realised we had a lot of time, we realised that we could produce our own translation. So Marcus and I decided that we would do the kind of bulk of the work for the surtitles and just translate in our own time. But for our four

favourite sections of the play we would commission some artists to write and we put out a call for collaborators and we had loads of incredible responses, from people wanting to work on the play. We ended up commissioning four incredible artists, Annie Drakes, Max Watkins, Ayna Taira, and Nicolette D'Angelo, who are all incredible writers, to work on our favourite sections of play which are right at the beginning, the Electra monologue, also the Apollo monologue at the end, a couple of scenes in the middle and the Orestes and Pylades scene. There's the Trojan prisoner of war scene as well. They were just the scenes for us that were most interesting from a reception history angle, they are scenes where we thought there was something interesting about them that didn't quite sit right with us about the way that they've been performed in the past. We kind of wanted to intervene in the text in these particular areas and to give the platform to other artists to kind of get their take on the play and their voices across. It's been fantastic. We have at least six people working on the translation of this play, so it's a real amalgamation of voices. Two of our other directorial principles, as well as movement, have been incongruity and accumulation and this is kind of all coming together in our translation, even though we can't put on the play we wanted, we're going to have this translation that's a real amalgamation of different voices and perspectives and also this accumulation of everybody's different takes and opinions. We've always said that the play is kind of like being on Twitter, just like hearing loads of voices, screaming into the void. I think we're going to be able to capture that in the translation, if not in a staged IRL production.

David Bullen

Amazing, amazing. If there's any Greek tragedy that's equivalent to Twitter or equivalent to that kind of bitterness it's Euripides' *Orestes* - that cacophony of voices, it's so interesting. Marcus, do you have anything you wanted to add to that?

Marcus Bell

I guess the only thing I'd want to add - thank you, Allison for for describing this really exciting part of the project - is that we were really focused on trying

to do something queer with this, to use a queer way of doing theatre. Something really important for me as a queer theatre maker, as a queer practitioner, was that this could be something that we brought into, quite a traditional space. We were really inspired by the work that UCL have been doing - to do these incredible performances for years now in translation, in really accessible and exciting ways. People like Helen Eastman as well, doing work on these really exciting rambunctious versions and of course, the work that was being done at King's. So we wanted to take that in and use that energy, doing this queer way of like engaging and intervening with the text, making it feel political. Originally, it was really going to be about climate crisis, staging climate crisis. Now we really feel it can, be a way of staging and engaging with the horrible kind of institutional power or power structures that Apollo represents. Like you said, "let's go back to the Eumenides, come on, let's fix this". That's why we picked these scenes. Orestes and Pylades: for its Tumblr fame, the soft, tender, queer tumblr-ness of it - the bit interactions that they have between each other get shared widely. Then, of course, the prisoner of war, because like Allison said, it has this reception history, but it also has quite a racist reception history, one in which it really becomes about othering the prisoner of war, and really about making that difference about a sense of power imbalance, of power structure, of a colonial moment of capture and encounter. Then we really get to see that in the incredible translations of Apollo and the Electra monologue that bookend. So yeah, just super grateful to be working with these awesome artists and getting to do something, hopefully, queer with the Oxford Greek Play.

David Mullen

Thank you so much, it's so great to hear about this project, it's so interesting. I guess there's going to be a different range of challenges for the UCL project. But I wonder if you could - Lewis, Elena and Zoë - whether you could reflect on that for us, what were some of the things you got you excited about this project?

Zoë De Barros

I think probably the main thing that got me really excited was actually just to do with working with the people that are part of the production team and cast. I think, also I started to see theatre as a real opposite place to what's happening in the world, as a really uniting force. I think, just because there's there's been a lack of stimulation going on, especially in person, it's just made me think anything anyone does is amazing. I'm just so excited to work with everyone and when things do go right and when you get a scene that's just really beautiful and you hit on something, it's just so exciting. So exciting, because it's the highlight of the week, it's the one thing you've gone in to do and everyone's really excited and everyone's happy and everyone's just sort of deprived of human contact. So that's been really amazing. I think the team is so talented. So all of that's been incredibly moving and feel so lucky to be working with these people in times like this. So I think it's been the contact, that's been really exciting and just working with other people.

Lewis Bentley

Definitely - our actors and prop team have been fantastic to work with. The fact that we have one firm thing happening some sometime February (in whatever medium), it's meant that people got a date in there and are working towards something. We were in the theatre a couple of weeks ago and it was quite cathartic actually, just being back in an empty theatre and seeing what they're doing with it - all the social distancing measures that go into place. It took us back quite a bit. I think on the other hand, people are so important and we've always got to think for these University Greek and classical plays, they are student heavy, they are student-emphasised - this is what we are all aiming towards. So it's really enabled us to turn around and get back to the foundations of the thing: how can we best help students during this time? How can we best help them, be it at A Level, GCSE, or just through general interest? We're doing a lot in terms of education here, we're really trying to think how can we best help them through the Greek play to do this. I think people as whole is the best way to sum it up.

Elena Bashkova

I completely agree with Zoe and Louis. But personally, for me, like for Alison, I think that choosing a translation of the *Odyssey* has been the most exciting part of the project so far. So we decided to choose Emily Wilson's translation, because it was relevant to the modern audience. Like Lewis mentioned, our target audience will probably be relatively young people and perhaps those who are just a bit less aware of the classics and we want to stage an *Odyssey* that would be understandable and appealing to everyone. Because I think that a lot of people think that some classics and some legendary people can be a bit dry. So by choosing something that was a bit more radical or a bit more modern as a translation, we wanted to just make sure that everyone could understand the play that we're staging and everyone could be able to identify with it.

David Bullen

Yeah, what a fantastic sentiment there, absolutely. There's, I think, in some ways such a perception around the tradition of university Greek plays, that it's a little bit of navel gazing. It's producing plays, sometimes in languages that few people speak, for perhaps a very select audience, or for an initiated audience as it were, just for people who are very interested. What's so interesting is that's not really been the case, especially at UCL, especially at King's and Oxford and indeed Cambridge for the last couple of years. All of us have been challenging that in one way or another. But what's so interesting here is that this year, there's been an additional challenge, as you're saying, Elena, an additional reminder that actually, these plays, these texts, these myths, can be really interesting, they can be made to find relevance in the contemporary world, including our very fraught contemporary world. Perhaps more importantly, the students making it are fantastically innovative thinkers who are drawing on theatre-making methodologies, there are professional theatre-making practices going into this. Indeed, for many of these projects, there are professional theatre makers being involved in it. So how great, I think that's a really lovely sentiment for us to end on Elena. So thank you so much for finishing us off. Thank you so much, it's been a real pleasure for me

to do this. Thank you so much for inviting me, Giovanna, to come and have this chat. It's a lovely little final treat before the festive break.

Giovanna Di Martino

Thank you, David and thank you everyone. This is so exciting to hear and I'm very much looking forward to watching all these new very exciting and unconventional new projects that are going on. Now, I know that you can follow the developments of these projects on social media. So the UCL play - you can follow what they're doing at UCL Classical Play 2021 on Facebook and they're also on Instagram at UCL Greek Play; the King's project that David mentioned, for very first time I hear, you can follow the developments of that at King's Greek Play. You'll definitely be kept updated on the Oxford project as well, we will send an update through the APGRD. Thank you so much everyone for being part of this. This is very exciting and I'm looking forward to seeing these plays. Thanks again.