

A.E. Stallings on Aeschylus's *The Persians* in the *TLS*: "The ghost scene alone must have seemed a dangerous necromancy."

We wrote about Athens-based poet A.E. Stallings's off-the-cuff remarks when she attended the National Theatre of Greece's production of Aeschylus's *The Persians* in the ancient Greek theater of Epidaurus on July 25.

The play is Aeschylus's *The Persians*, circa 472 B.C., about the Persian-Greek war. The playwright himself had participated in the crucial battle it describes, so he knew what he was talking about. It is not only the oldest surviving Greek play, but Aeschylus's most powerful antiwar statement, praising the freedom of the individual and the wisdom of democratic norms.

Now she's written at length about the experience in the current *Times Literary Supplement*, and, for the time being, it seems to be out from behind the paywall, here. You can start with our excerpt below, where the poet describes what the production meant to Greeks:

Aeschylus had fought in the battle: some of the messenger speech is arguably an eyewitness account. When I think about what that first production must have been like – Aeschylus conjuring up on stage not only Xerxes, the man who had recently razed the city, but the ghost of his father, Darius, in front of an audience for whom this was a raw and recent memory (many would have been veterans), and just below the Persian-destroyed temple on the Acropolis, I get goose-bumps. The ghost scene alone must have seemed a dangerous necromancy. ...

We recognized acquaintances from Athens sitting at the café, despite their masks. "Of course the play could not be more topical", one asserted, indicating recent provocations of the Turkish president, **Erdoğan**, in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the night we were at the play, in late July, the Greek military was on high alert. The presence of the prime minister and his entourage (one lady in a sequined "evening" mask) added to the nationalist energy in the air.

The tragedy plays differently to Greek and non-Greek audiences. Reviews of the live-streamed production in the *Guardian* (subtitled "a triumph of empathy for a time of Covid-19") and the *New York Times* praised the production for its timely lessons on hubris and its message of empathy. But for the overwhelmingly Greek audience present, thrilled to be out of doors at a production at all after a long lockdown, and potentially on the brink of war, the play was rousing patriotic. The image of Greece as a scrappy little country punching above its weight, taking no orders from kings and exerting its naval prowess to push back against a larger threatening power, was as appealing as ever.

When Queen Atossa (widow of King Darius and mother of Xerxes) interrogated the chorus about the battle and the nature of the victorious Greeks, the exchange felt like a kind of catechism of Athenian democracy. "What Monarch do they have; who leads the army?", she demanded to know of the Greeks. When the Chorus responded, "No one, they are not slaves; no one gives them orders", the crowd erupted in applause, as perhaps the first audience did.

Later, in the messenger speech, he describes how, as the Greeks bore down, they burst into the chant: "Go, sons of the Greeks, and liberate the fatherland!" This was another moment the audience was waiting to applaud enthusiastically. The play, produced in a modern Greek translation by **Theodoros Stephanopoulos**, translates this line by alluding to poet **Rhigas's** "War Song", popular from the time of the Greek war of independence, a poem which **Byron** translates as "Sons of the Greeks, Arise!" The war song is sometimes called the Greek Marseillaise, and if it sounds strikingly close (both can be sung to the same tune), that may be because the Marseillaise is also consciously imitating the Greek of Aeschylus. Sitting there, I imagined Aeschylus being pleased that his anthem to liberty was still sung lustily millennia after his death.