

Theatre and Pedagogy: Adapting Euripides' *Trojan Women* and the Political Science Classroom

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Dr. Kotsovilis responded in writing to questions prepared and sent by his colleague Martin Revermann. The answers were received on 17 February 2023. The text version of the interview was finalised by Martin Revermann.

[MR] By way of introduction, what is your *Trojan Women* project about?

[SK] The *Trojan Women* project was a 2021–2022 pedagogical initiative spearheaded by me and Dr. Martin Revermann from the University of Toronto – to promote innovative learning in a year-long, remotely taught upper undergraduate International Relations course on the causes, characteristics, and consequences of inter- and intra-state war. Funded by a UTM Global Classrooms grant, it consisted of a composite assignment that took place in three phases. During the first one, towards the end of the first semester, students selected a modern (post-World War II) conflict for an eight-page short paper assignment and began to analyse it via exploring one of its causes, one of its characteristics and one of its consequences. In the second phase, from the winter break onwards, they started collaborating and preparing in seven groups towards a live performative reading of seven excerpts from an ancient Greek anti-war tragedy,

Euripides' *Trojan Women* adapted to the recent civil war in Syria. Students did not need to read any part during the event if they did not wish to, but still had to participate in their team's meetings and assist the group effort. In their rehearsals, they were assisted remotely by Vickie Beesley and Sana'a Al-Froukh, two invited experts from Scotland who were instrumental (the former directing, and the latter helping translate the text and acting) in the 2019 Glasgow and Edinburgh staging of an adaptation of this play with Syrian refugees as actors, the text of which was used in the class. This performative reading event took place remotely during a class in the middle of the second semester and was followed by a virtual roundtable of experts on war, theatre and psychology and a Q&A by the class. During the final phase, students returned to their work-in-progress and reflected on their performative reading experience and how it could interact and inform the consequences part of their short paper, which was due two weeks later. Overall, this project was designed to allow students to further explore the consequences of war across time via a different mode of learning; to help animate a remotely taught course during the difficult period of the pandemic; to foster collaboration between students, disciplines, and academic departments; and, ultimately to create a memorable educational experience. Student feedback following a survey completed after the assignment confirmed the high utility and enjoyability of this composite exercise for the class.

[MR] Why use theatre and performance in the context of teaching political science?

[SK] Research suggests that student engagement is critical for improving their attention, participation, and learning, and it can be further enhanced by the introduction of innovations in the classroom. The use of theatre and performance as instructional tools constitutes such an innovation.

Theatre has had an educating and political role since antiquity, and as such would be well suited as a learning method in a classroom where the topic of war – the breakdown of politics, or, according to the famous 19th century military theorist Carl von Clausewitz, its continuation by other means – is taught. The 'politics is theatre' thesis requires little elaboration, especially in our modern era of often politicised media-dominated political contests. The same can be argued about its 'theatre is politics' twin argument. One may simply look at the impact of *The Theatre of War* productions in the United States founded by Bryan Doerries, who, in the aftermath of a devastating personal experience and the solace that he discovered ancient tragedy provided, sought to use the latter to help traumatised communities heal. Since 2009, this project has been staging ancient Greek tragedies and linking them to contemporary socio-political subjects followed by town-hall style discussions. Indeed, from Aeschylus and Sophocles to Brecht and Miller, a humanising experience connects ancient and modern theatre. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle challenges Plato by equating tragedy with the representation and expression of action and living.

The edifying and educational value of theatre to help recreate and explicate dimensions of the human experience (like the tragic consequences of war for the civilian

population) is, therefore, well-established. Moreover, a theatrical and performative dimension in the classroom can help provide an additional layer of understanding of the subject at hand beyond the often-dry pages of textbooks and articles. In our case, given the sensitive topic of the consequences of war, and the remote mode of the classroom during a difficult academic year with the pandemic in full swing, a performative reading would be an ideal middle between a time-consuming and taxing (or triggering) drama performance (after all this was an International Relations class) and a simple, more easily forgettable plain reading of a text even as an in-class exercise. Because it would allow for imagining and sympathising with the lives, circumstances, and predicaments of those in a novel, a poem, or in this case an ancient tragedy, without forcing students to become fully immersed, or incarnate a role like in an actual play, it was considered the optimal learning tool to use.

[MR] Which difficulties did you encounter? What would you do differently in the future?

[SK] The difficulties encountered were different from the ones envisioned at the onset of the project. Our concerns had involved low participation levels, the play's somber themes – juxtaposing one of the most heart-wrenching ancient tragedies with a modern one that within the span of a decade resulted in half a million casualties, over twelve million people displaced and in the near complete destruction of a country's infrastructure, economy, and public services – and the potential impact on the classroom spirit amidst an ongoing pandemic. Thankfully, they were all disproved by the very high number of student participants, the honest and inspiring discussions with students on difficult topics during and following rehearsals with our guest experts (one of which was a trained psychotherapist with significant experience in addressing traumas in refugee camps, and herself a Syrian refugee to Scotland), and enthusiastic student feedback in the survey.

Instead, the difficulties encountered had to do with meeting, scheduling, and technical matters during the preparation stage for teams, and some presentation glitches during the event itself. Students lamented the fact that it was difficult for them to meet in person to prepare and rehearse. Also, given that most meetings were held online via social media platforms, a few students suggested that at times they encountered connectivity and hardware problems. In addition, given that many students were connecting from different time zones, or had busy schedules complicated by other remote classes and/or part-time and *ad hoc* employment shifts, at times coordination within teams was also more difficult to achieve. Still, students reported that these challenges propelled them to seek solutions and work around them to meet, rehearse, and discuss their parts for the performative reading event.

The main issue during the live performative reading had to do with the nature of the remote meeting platform which did not allow for individual participants to speak at the same time in a synchronised fashion. During rehearsals it produced cacophony and voice overlap and, following director Beesley's advice, was abandoned. This effectively meant there could be no real chorus, and while such lines

were assigned to one individual at a time and were delivered successfully given this limitation, still the important dramatic effect that a larger group of participants produces in a theatrical reading was minimised. One of the obvious ways this could be improved would be a future production with students participating in-person, and therefore being able to perform as a single chorus some of the powerful lines from the *Trojan Women*. In addition, a live in-person future performative reading event would also help fully optimise coordination by eliminating the few seconds' lag that some of the students experienced when beginning to read through the remote platform – something that could also be more easily remedied with an in-person 'dress rehearsal'.

[MR] Is there saturation and emerging indifference with regard to refugee issues? And how can theatre and performance be helpful here?

[SK] A 24-hour news cycle, and a plethora of media sources, platforms, and news filters mean that attention spans are shortened, with focus shifting rapidly to the 'next big story'. To this mix can also be added the potential effects of secondary traumatic stress of being exposed to distressing news for a longer period of time. All of this suggests that, indeed, saturation from hearing about the plight of refugees has set in – as it does with other distressing news items. This is both appalling and alarming, as the numbers of displaced persons keep rising year after year. For example, according to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, every two seconds one person is forcibly displaced due to conflict or persecution, and the latest data (2021) witnessed the highest levels of forced displacement on record (82.4 million, up from 70.9 million from 2019). And while significantly lower from the 2015 apogee of over one million crossings by sea just to Europe and over 5,000 dead in 2016 – fuelled predominantly by the wars in Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq – this year (by mid-October 2022) has already witnessed 135,000 arrivals with over 2,100 missing or dead migrants in the Mediterranean.

Hence, besides the intrinsic value of its original plot to illustrate the severe consequences of war for civilians, the selection for our project of an adaptation of the *Trojan Women* that interjected the trials of Syrian refugees as they were displaced by the conflict and sought a new life in the United Kingdom also served to raise awareness of this ongoing tragedy. This exercise allowed students to gain a closer understanding of the refugees' ordeal and sympathise more, while a few were also able to connect on a personal level themselves (coming from immigrant families to Canada).

Theatre can therefore raise awareness and bear witness. A recent example is one of the latest (mid-2022) projects undertaken by the Theatre of War in the United States: a virtual performative reading of *The Suppliants* with American actors and featuring a Ukrainian chorus, that connected Aeschylus' ancient play of female asylum seekers to the ongoing refugee crisis in Ukraine.

[MR] What made you choose this ancient piece of theatre?

[SK] *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, originally performed in 415 BCE in Athens, is a quintessential anti-war play. It deals with the aftermath of the sack of Troy by the Greeks and the terrible fate of its civilians, including rape, enslavement, dislocation, and slaughter. The play's central, perennial themes of grief, loss, desolation, displacement, fear, and the question of whether any hope remains after such a catastrophe continue to speak to many of the devastating consequences of war that persist to this day. Its resonance with many contemporary wars and their effects has resulted in multiple translations and adaptations over time, and the play – in the form of editions, theatre productions, and films – has often been tied and adapted to topical conflicts. These include translations by Gilbert Murray and Franz Werfel in the middle of WWI, Jean-Paul Sartre's adaptation just after WWII, Sergio Véjar's 1963 *Los Troyanas* film following an armed revolt against the government, Michael Kakoyiannis' 1971 namesake movie during the Vietnam War, Femi Osofisan's 2000 metaphor for Sub-Saharan African conflict, and Yasmin Fedda's 2013 docudrama *The Queens of Syria* on the Syrian Conflict. More recently, *The Trojans* was also paired with the Syrian civil war in a theatre production in Edinburgh and Glasgow (2019) under the direction of Victoria Beesley and co-adapted by Sana'a Al Froukh, starring Syrian refugees to Scotland. As a result, this ancient piece of theatre, and especially its 2019 adaptation to mirror the consequences of the Syrian Civil war rendered it an ideal play for exploring facets of the consequences of war past and present. Our students, themselves agreed, noting, among other praise for the selection of the play, that it was 'very relevant to what we are studying throughout the course', and that it provided 'a more nuanced way to view conflict'.

[MR] Was this project about healing or teaching, or both?

[SK] The project was about both teaching and healing. While the Trojan War as described by Euripides is a fictitious war situated 3000 years in the past, the play's imagining of the war's aftermath for the defeated civilian population resonates with many characteristics of contemporary conflict: extensive atrocities, enslavement and displacement, the differential impact of war on gender, the norms of warfare, as well as the long-lasting political, social, and psychological consequences of combat. The added use of a text that also paralleled the suffering of the Trojan women to the Syrian civilians of today further increased its educational potency, immediacy, and urgency. Specifically, the performative reading of the Syrian part of the adapted play – the lines of individuals who recently went through a similar range of experiences – allowed students to obtain a closer, more direct vantage point to the consequences of war, and enabled a more comprehensive understanding of the assigned course material they read. Even the numerous differences between ancient and modern warfare (e.g., the existence of international and non-governmental organisations, the development of human rights law, the evolution of international humanitarian law, and peacekeeping and peace-building operations) were better fleshed out via

the invited comparison. As one class member stated, 'I felt a stronger connection to a conflict than [...] a textbook.' In short, this exercise helped students learn more and better about the consequences of war.

But beyond its teaching benefits, this project was also consciously devised with healing in mind. Since the onset of the pandemic, students' academic and mental health has been seriously impacted, with many struggling to cope with multiple challenges. As quite a few students mentioned, this exercise offered an 'opportunity to engage' and provided 'some sort of normalcy' against the backdrop of the 'harsh reality' of COVID-19. In other words, by bringing students together to discuss how to express the traumas of war, the *Trojan Women* project provided space for them not only to explore the course's themes, but also to share their daily experiences amidst a traumatic period – as an additional coping mechanism. As one student noted, 'sometimes, we would simply meet and talk for about an hour about our lives, school, and other mundane things, which was very needed during the uncertainty of the ongoing pandemic'.

The healing effects of theatre are also directly visible in the amateur Syrian refugees who performed the play and, in their audience – a good number also composed of refugees – during the 2019 staging of *The Trojans*. As both director Beesley and Ms. Al Froukh stressed in their interactions with our students when speaking about their experience of directing and acting in that production, the use of an ancient tragedy with so many similarities to the effects of modern conflict acted therapeutically, allowing participants and audiences the space, voice, and perspective to process their experiences, and contributing to their healing path. It is also no accident that the Scottish *Trojans* is connected to the earliest efforts in the Syrian Civil war for the use of therapeutic drama projects in Jordanian refugee camps for those fleeing Syria.

[MR] Do you have similar projects in mind for the future?

[SK] Given the success of the *Trojan Women* project, there are plans to continue to infuse our classrooms with this type of innovative learning exercises and collaborative assignments. The next step consists of replicating a performative reading of the Syrian Civil war adaptation of this Euripides' play in-person, by staging it at Theatre Erindale (our university's theatre). This is also envisioned to broaden the cooperation further between departments and disciplines, by way of coordinating parallel assignments in an International Relations, Classics and Theatre Studies classes and inviting students of the two courses to work together towards it.

Beyond this expanded in-person *Trojan Women* project, we will also be looking to other Political Science courses into which suitable ancient and modern plays can be embedded and will be working to devise a variety of related assignments that can further enliven and enrich the material for the benefit of our students. A few examples of candidate plays and related themes would be the following: Aeschylus' *The Persians* and imperial overstretch; Shakespeare's *Henry V* and war initiation and mobilisation; Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* and the ideological sources of militarism; Lev Dodin's adapta-

tion of Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* and totalitarianism and oppression; and Harold Pinter's *One for the Road* and torture. In addition to illustrating the very rich repertoire of plays available to augment the teaching of Political Science, these sample titles and their themes also highlight the facileness – not to say, naturalness – with which continued dialogue and collaboration between the two disciplines can open new avenues of fruitful pedagogical cooperation.



