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# Greek Tragedy, Agonistic Space, and Contemporary Performance

In this article Stephe Harrop combines theatre history and performance analysis with contemporary agonistic theory to re-conceptualize Greek tragedy's contested spaces as key to the political potentials of the form. She focuses on Athenian tragedy's competitive and conflictual negotiation of performance space, understood in relation to the cultural trope of the *agon*. Drawing on David Wiles's structuralist analysis of Greek drama, which envisages tragedy's spatial confrontations as a theatrical correlative of democratic politics, performed tragedy is here re-framed as a site of embodied contest and struggle – as agonistic spatial practice. This historical model is then applied to a recent case study, Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* as co-produced by Actors Touring Company and the Lyceum, Edinburgh, in 2016–17, proposing that the frictionous effects, encounters, and confrontations generated by this production (re-staged and re-articulated across multiple venues and contexts) exemplify some of the potentials of agonistic spatial practice in contemporary re-performance of Greek tragedy. It is contended that re-imagining tragic theatre, both ancient and modern, as (in Chantal Mouffe's terms) 'agonistic public space' represents an important new approach to interpreting and creatively re-imagining, interactions between Athenian tragedy and democratic politics. Stephe Harrop is a Lecturer in Drama at Liverpool Hope University, where her research focuses primarily on performances and texts adapted from, or responding to, ancient tragedy and epic. She is co-author of *Greek Tragedy and the Contemporary Actor* (Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).

**Key terms:** agon, democracy, space, chorus, Athens, Aeschylus, *The Suppliant Women*, Chantal Mouffe.

HOW DID ANCIENT TRAGEDY encode and embody political meaning? How can present-day performances of Greek plays engage with contemporary political debates and divisions? In this article I address these questions by combining theatre history and performance analysis with contemporary agonistic theory to re-conceptualize the contested spaces of tragedy as key to the political potentials of the form. Following a brief survey of current debates concerning tragedy and democratic politics, I focus on Athenian tragedy's competitive and conflictual negotiation of performance space, understood in relation to the pervasive cultural trope of the *agon*.

Drawing on David Wiles's structuralist analysis of Greek drama, which envisages tragedy's spatial confrontations as a theatrical correlate of democratic politics, performed tragedy is here re-framed as a site of

embodied contest and confrontation – as agonistic spatial practice. This model is then applied to a current case study, a recent production of Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* which, it is proposed, exemplifies some of the potentials of agonistic spatial practice in contemporary re-performance of Greek tragedy. I contend that re-imagining tragic theatre, both ancient and modern, as (in Chantal Mouffe's terms) 'agonistic public space' represents an important new approach to interpreting interactions between Athenian tragedy and democratic politics.<sup>1</sup>

To discuss ancient Greek tragedy in relation to contemporary democratic practices is always to run the risk of perpetuating self-serving mythologies.<sup>2</sup> Elaborating upon Salvatore Settis's critique of belated appropriations of classical antiquity as 'the very *foundation* of Western culture and history', both Nicholas Ridout and Margherita Laera

have highlighted ways in which the rhetoric surrounding present-day re-stagings of ancient drama recapitulates (and reifies) ahistorical assumptions concerning the relationship between ancient and modern theatre cultures, and their respective political practices.<sup>3</sup>

Challenging the 'myth of simultaneous origin', according to which tragic theatre and democratic politics sprang into being at the same cultural moment,<sup>4</sup> Ridout cautions against the comforting delusion 'that "the Greeks" speak to us through an almost uninterrupted line of performative reenactments of their political practices and theatrical productions', or that 'when we speak of theatre and democracy we speak of the same things as did our forebears in fourth- and fifth-century Athens'.<sup>5</sup>

### The Mythologizing Fallacy

In *Reaching Athens* (2013) Laera argues that 'in the "democratic" West, people like to believe that their civilization, their form of government and their theatre emerged from "classical" Athens',<sup>6</sup> identifying the theatrical re-performance and adaptation of Athenian tragedy as 'one of the key sites where such mythologies are disseminated in the twenty-first century'.<sup>7</sup> Her argument continues:

Their 'classical' status offers contemporary Europeans a reassuring way to achieve self-definition and affirm themselves on the global stage, but the single most important factor is the association of tragedy with democracy in Athens. The idea that the Athenians 'invented' the theatre alongside democracy, that they also 'discovered' philosophy and the *polis*, that these texts were the 'first' dramatic scripts in the history of the West, and that the occasion for their performance was an inherently 'democratic', communal, and participatory ritual, providing Athenian citizens with a sense of belonging and political engagement, constitute the most important factors contributing to Greek tragedy's popularity on contemporary European stages.

In this assertive critique, Laera positions the re-performance of tragedy as providing present-day elites with high-culture pathways to self-definition through the establish-

ment of a mythologized Athens as consoling mirror-image.<sup>8</sup>

Any discussion of Greek tragedy and democracy also gives rise to contentious questions around notions of 'community'. As well as implying a direct cultural lineage connecting ancient and modern practices, idealizing accounts of Athenian drama frequently frame the occasion(s) of tragic performance as moments of community building. Ridout deconstructs the claim that Athenian tragedy straightforwardly 'offers its participants resources for making community' in subsequent settings, as a position which depends upon the imaginative fabrication of 'an idealized past as a resource for constructing a better future in response to a painful and alienating present'.<sup>9</sup> Laera further notes that the contemporary image of the ancient theatre audience as 'a unified body politic taking part in the public, civic, and "democratic" ritual of theatre' is a potent cultural icon,<sup>10</sup> but asserts that this myth can only be maintained at the cost of 'the elimination of conflict, disagreement and resistance' from accounts of ancient theatre as a democratically engaged practice.<sup>11</sup>

Such warnings highlight the need for politically engaged re-performance of ancient drama to move beyond comforting narratives of tragedy as inherently community building, or cosily constitutive of social and political unanimity. Here, Claire Bishop's formulation concerning participatory practices in contemporary art is apposite: 'unease, discomfort, or frustration – along with fear, contradiction, exhilaration, and absurdity – can be crucial'.<sup>12</sup>

Ironically enough, the publicity surrounding my central case study, *The Suppliant Women* (co-produced by Actors Touring Company and the Lyceum, Edinburgh, in 2016–17), amply evidences both of the tendencies criticized by Laera and Ridout. The production's poster image and the cover of David Greig's published adaptation borrow iconography which directly evokes the Mediterranean 'migrant crisis' of 2015, indicating an explicit awareness of the uneasy political resonances of the drama's central conflict.

However, discussions of the production's antecedents and aims recurrently downplay such potentially frictionous aspects of the work, instead focusing on beneficial, communitarian elements of staging an ancient play for and with local communities. 'The Athenians invented theatre and democracy in the same breath,' writes director Ramin Gray in his preface to the published playtext, adding that revisiting this (putative) 'moment' through theatre performance allows present-day populations to 'start to renew our commitment to being together in a shared, public space'.

Describing the production's decision to recruit volunteer choruses in each city where the drama is re-performed, Gray evokes an aspiration to 'collapse ourselves into one being, a sort of reconstituted Aeschylus', within a project where 'engagement and participation are key'.<sup>13</sup> And in an online video promoting the project, composer John Browne comments that 'the Greeks invented this', directly attributing the modern notion of the 'community chorus' to ancient Athens.<sup>14</sup>

In both formulations, the harmonious blending of diverse communities – classical Athens and modern Edinburgh, professional theatre-makers and non-elite local populations – is presented as a key benefit of the enterprise.<sup>15</sup> In consequence, the analysis of *The Suppliant Women* developed in this article often reads against the grain of the production's own publicity, deliberately highlighting moments when the re-staged tragedy gives rise to alternative, disharmonious outcomes. The present method might itself be characterized as agonistic, foregrounding a more challenging set of potentials present in the play's re-performed spatial conflicts, and its public reception across a range of spaces, locales, and contexts.

The model of tragic agonism outlined in this article does not seek to perpetuate the mythologizing narratives just described, which simultaneously idealize fifth-century Athens's political achievements, and position present-day western democracies as inheritors of the ancient city's civic and artistic legacies. Nor does it figure the modern-day

re-performance of ancient tragedies as a site for naive, nostalgic, or utopian attempts to forge a new political cohesion/consensus in some way congruent or comparable with the community-building function commonly attributed to Athenian drama in its performance contexts. Instead, my argument posits the agonistic qualities of Athenian dramaturgy as central to theatre's interactions with the city's political life, in an analysis which foregrounds dissent, contestation, and competitive public encounter as key constituents of ancient tragic performance.

The conception of tragic spatial practice as multiple (flexibly responsive to a range of locales and contexts) as developed here also runs counter to ahistoric claims that ancient and modern practices can be elided, contending that different times and places manifest and embody their own distinct political conflicts and confrontations in very different ways. As a result, the agonistic model of tragic performance practice articulated here presents a necessary alternative to idealizing narratives of ancient performance and its present-day reception. It retains the sense that Athenian drama was profoundly interconnected with the political practices of the ancient city, while asserting that a key manifestation of tragedy's democratic potential may be identified in a series of dramaturgical tropes rooted in conflict, contestation, and struggle.<sup>16</sup>

### Agonistic Theory and Athenian Tragedy

In contemporary political theory, the term 'agonism', popularized by theorist Chantal Mouffe, describes a model of democratic practice characterized by ongoing processes of public contestation between different, passionately engaged, interest groups. This model is in opposition to neoliberalism's pursuit of a consensual centre-ground which, in its insistence upon the logical inevitability of its own (market-driven) hegemony, unintentionally encourages 'the crystallization of collective passions around issues which cannot be managed by the democratic process' resulting in 'an explosion of antagonisms that can tear up the very basis of civility'.<sup>17</sup>

In *Agonistics*, Mouffe expands upon this diagnosis, arguing that a functioning democracy ‘calls for a confrontation of democratic political positions’, without which ‘there is always the danger that this democratic confrontation will be replaced by a confrontation between non-negotiable moral values or essentialist forms of identifications’.<sup>18</sup> Mouffe’s theory builds upon the premise that ‘pluralist democracy’ depends upon ‘the legitimation of conflict’, outlining how:

For the agonistic perspective, the central category of democratic politics is the category of the ‘adversary’, the opponent with whom one shares a common allegiance to . . . democratic principles.

Mouffe conceptualizes the ‘agonistic model of democracy’ as ‘struggle between adversaries’ who are mutually committed to ‘the legitimacy of their opponent’s right to fight for the victory’.<sup>19</sup> Agonistic practice, she proposes, provides ‘channels through which collective passions will be given ways to express themselves’, allowing a pluralistic society to acknowledge and openly choose between the range of passionately held (and sometimes irreconcilable) positions occupied by its citizens. The aim is to ‘mobilize those passions towards democratic designs’, rather than to force dissenting voices beyond the margins of established political discourse.<sup>20</sup> In this way, Mouffe’s work identifies ongoing and impassioned ‘agonistic struggle’ (rather than the pursuit of an illusory, and – in practice – exclusionary, consensus) as ‘the very condition of a vibrant democracy’.<sup>21</sup>

This agonistic analysis explicitly responds to challenges facing contemporary democratic politics, yet the term itself can be traced back to the ancient world, and to the radical political experiments begun in Athens around the turn of the fifth century BCE. In his 1997 chapter ‘Deep Plays’, Paul Cartledge identifies a ‘mentality of *agonia*’ as underlying this society. He highlights the impact of this cultural trope upon Athens’s emerging dramaturgical conventions, which embedded competitive struggle on both dramatic and metatheatrical levels.<sup>22</sup> In the city’s tragic plays, characters enact and

agonize over passionately articulated conflicts (their personal anguishes often implicated in the survival or downfall of a wider political community), while such performances were explicitly embedded in competitive structures which officially sanctioned artistic contest and confrontation as a constituent element of the festival gathering.

### Agonistic Language and Structure

Jennifer Wallace reflects upon the ways in which agonistic language comes to define theatrical endeavour during the fifth century BCE, when a verb initially associated with gymnasia and wrestling-grounds gradually came to signify ‘to contend for a prize on stage’ or ‘to act’, adding that: ‘It was through *agōn* – competition, acting, agony – that the Greeks developed a sense of who they were’.<sup>23</sup> In the recent volume *Performing Antagonism* (2017) Tony Fisher revisits these arguments, noting the verb *agonizomai*’s signification of ‘fighting and struggling before a public and/or speaking and debating in public’, framing the ‘public realm’ of the ancient *polis* as ‘an agonistic space activated by and promoting an ethic of “agonic” participation’. His discussion positions the tragic drama of Athens (among other public contestations) as ‘a site in which the *agōn* was revealed, performed . . . collectively experienced’.<sup>24</sup>

The paired set speeches known as *agons* famously occupy a key place in tragedy’s written and spoken texts. In Athenian tragedy, the term is used to define a dramatic confrontation in which two characters present extended speeches of equal length, one after another, propounding fiercely opposed points of view. It has been widely noted that this dramaturgical device mirrors the real-life procedures of the city’s law courts, where litigants competed to produce speeches that would compel the sympathy and support of an audience of jurors. On this basis, Edith Hall identifies the agonistic encounter (borrowed by the democratic city from the martial and recreational practices of an earlier, aristocratic society) as a key isomorphic trope binding together the political, legal,

athletic, and dramatic institutions of the polis.<sup>25</sup>

This formulation valuably foregrounds conceptual links between rhetorical (law-courts, political speeches, tragic orations) and embodied manifestations (athletics, wrestling, tragic physical performance) of agonistic struggle within Athens's culture of public contestation, highlighting the fact that the fifth-century *agon* was both a rhetorical and a physical phenomenon. Agonistic encounter, both in the sense of verbal contest, and of struggling, embattled, and suffering bodies competing in public, was a recurring cultural trope in fifth-century Athens.

Yet while Fisher, among others, has argued that Athenian tragedy 'emerged from a political imaginary that defined itself in every sense as agonistic', few accounts of this phenomenon have addressed the relationship between this culture of agonism and spatial practice in tragic dramaturgy.<sup>26</sup> My discussion therefore explores the proposition that not only the written and spoken texts of plays, but also the spatial dynamics of Athenian tragedy may have been permeated by agonistic principles through which ancient performers were able to embody both the unresolved political struggles of ancient tragic drama and – by extension – the anxieties and uncertainties of their own polity.

### Agonistic Spatial Dynamics in Tragedy

Any discussion of this subject owes a debt to David Wiles, whose *Tragedy in Athens* (1997) and *Greek Theatre Performance: an Introduction* (2000) provide a vital framework for the present project of developing an agonistic reading of tragedy's spatial interactions. Departing from idealizing perspectives which seek to present Greek theatre(s) 'as the scene of consensus', Wiles argues that the much-visited theatre of Epidaurus provides a misleading guide to the practice of the classical period, since its impeccably symmetrical geometry dates from a historical moment when Hellenistic culture had already begun to ossify Athenian plays and practices: its acting space was not functional until almost 300 BCE.<sup>27</sup>

In *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (2003), Wiles contrasts such Hellenistic sites with the early theatre of Ikarion. This latter (in Wiles's analysis) is revealed as an irregular space, shaped by a range of non-dramatic considerations, its non-geometric performance zone defined by natural topography and the demands of sacred ritual and procession.<sup>28</sup> According to this argument, performance spaces in the fifth century BCE did not offer a 'model of architectural harmony', but were sites 'of imbalance, conflict, and continuous change'.<sup>29</sup>

The tragic performances Wiles envisages taking place within these sites are defined by equally unstable spatial dynamics, based on 'the shifting relationship between an individual and a group'.<sup>30</sup> He endorses the view that protagonist(s) and chorus shared the same space during the fifth century BCE, rather than being divided hierarchically by different performance levels as in later Hellenistic theatre practices,<sup>31</sup> figuring their highly charged and often conflictual encounters and interactions as 'the spatial correlative of democracy', with their individual and massed movements mapping the ebb and flow of a given tragic narrative's progressive power play.<sup>32</sup> For Wiles, tragic performers, competing for control of the 'strongest points' of theatrical space, are explicitly conceptualized as engaging in a 'democratic spatial practice', their interactions physically embodying an unpredictable succession of confrontations, alliances, ruptures, reversals, and re-combinations in a manner characteristic (and representative) of democratic politics.<sup>33</sup>

Wiles's analysis has clear resonances with the principles of agonistic theory introduced at the beginning of this article.<sup>34</sup> His framing of tragedy's physical scores as a series of contestations between individuals and groups vying for dominant positions, its performers (in Mouffe's terms) as adversaries, or 'friendly enemies', contending fiercely for possession of spatial authority, while collectively submitting to the shared dramaturgical conventions which governed Athens's competitive theatre practice.<sup>35</sup>

In this context, it may also be worth recalling the (quasi-mythical) origins story

of Thespis, which locates the creation of dramatic performance in relational spatial dynamics, as one performer steps away from or out of the chorus, in so doing mapping a new spatial division between protagonist and collective that kick-starts the evolution of tragic dramaturgy. While the precise details of ancient choreographic practice are irrecoverable, approaching the physical scores of ancient plays with an eye to the genre's agonistic qualities can support the creative re-activation of tragedy's political potentials in a range of modern contexts in ways which both exceed and challenge idealizing clichés concerning aesthetic harmony, and the cultivation of community unanimity.

My next section begins to articulate what agonistic spatial practice might look like in relation to the contemporary re-performance of Greek tragedy, considering both dramatic and metatheatrical contestations of theatre space, focusing on the recent example of *The Suppliant Women*.

### ***The Suppliant Women: Agonistic Argos***

Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* is a drama profoundly concerned with the occupation and contestation of space. In the play, fifty Egyptian virgins seek sanctuary from forced marriages in the Greek city of Argos. They claim a right to the city's support since their ancestress, Io, was a priestess in Argos, before being driven into Egyptian exile by a vengeful Hera. Drawing on a ritual heritage they share with their hosts, the Danaids claim sanctuary by sitting in supplication at a sacred site, from which they cannot be forcibly removed without incurring the anger of Zeus (in traditional religious practice the protector of strangers and suppliants).

Yet their presence provokes consternation among a local populace who fear that granting asylum to these self-proclaimed kinswomen may lead to a new war erupting on their own territory. Nor is the protagonist-chorus's occupation of sacred space consistently modest and benign. For them, an Argive temple precinct offers both religious sanctuary and political leverage, as they threaten to hang themselves from statues of

the twelve Olympians if their appeal goes unheard, an act promising defilement to the whole city. *The Suppliant Women*, then, is a fiercely argued political drama, its conflicts and confrontations driven by the chorus's appropriation and occupation of theatrical space.<sup>36</sup> And the production explored here is deeply responsive to the agonistic spatial contestations inherent in the plot and dramaturgy of this chorus-driven tragedy.

In *Tragedy in Athens*, Wiles outlines how the contentious spatial interactions of *The Suppliant Women* may have played out in the distinctive space of the Theatre of Dionysus. He proposes that the physical remains of an archaic altar, the *thymelê*, visually marked the centre of the theatre's rounded dancing space or *orchestra*, this architectural feature being dramatically re-purposed as the sacred rock/altar alluded to in Aeschylus' text, and a focus for the chorus's occupation of Argive sacred space.<sup>37</sup>

However, the contemporary re-making of ancient spatial practices does not necessarily entail the literal replication of Athenian topographies or choreographies. In the ATC-Lyceum production (designed by Lizzie Clachan), a concrete-slab-paved precinct, laid along (and slightly projecting beyond) the central axis of the Lyceum's stage, becomes the focus of agonistic contestation. In the (implicit) spatial logic of this staging, the space's upstage entrances stand for distant Egypt, while a pair of staircases giving access to the stage from the stalls represent the route into the city of Argos. Accordingly, the play's protagonist-chorus enter from upstage, processing towards the audience in the course of their opening ode, in which they recount their journey so far, counterpointing their fears and sufferings with those of the persecuted Io.

In appearance and presence, this chorus subvert conventional expectations. They are diverse in appearance, dressed in colourful, modern trousers and tops, some of them looking ready for the gym, while others would not look out of place at a music festival. (A black scarf or shawl draped across each chorus-woman's shoulders provides a note of uniformity, although even



Lizzie Clachan's design for *The Suppliant Women* at the Lyceum, Edinburgh: 'a concrete-slab-paved precinct, laid along and slightly projecting beyond the central axis of the stage'.

these are different in size and texture.) Although they move together, responding to a shared, practised choreography (devised and taught by Sasha Milavic Davies), the women's bodies are mismatched, displaying different levels of skill, energy, or rhythmic precision. They are led by a professional actress (Gemma May Rees) performing the function of chorus-leader, although this is not necessarily evident to the eye in the

performance's opening stages, where the sheer mass of this moving choral group is its most striking quality.<sup>38</sup>

The young women carry the suppliant branches which their ancient counterparts bear as a crucial component of their ritual claim to sanctuary. In Aeschylus, these traditional markers are described as olive branches wreathed in wool; in 2016, these symbolic boughs have become tree branches

wrapped in rags, or festooned with streaming ribbons of white plastic.<sup>39</sup> The branches increase the apparent mass of this moving group of bodies, as well as lending an edge of wildness, potential danger, to their collective presence.

As the chorus women confront the singular figure of the Argive king (Oscar Batterham), their suppliant branches acquire a new spatial character. No longer lifted above the head (as required by Greek religious custom), they are now held horizontally, as a weapon might be hefted. Argos's ruler has already wondered whether the foreign women he finds encamped outside the city belong to some half-known barbarian culture, their transgressive spatial assertiveness and un-Greek appearance fuelling his speculations:

Some say there's Indian nomad women  
Who ride wild camels like we ride horses.  
Is that you? Are you them?  
Are you maybe Ethiopian?  
If you had spears I'd think perhaps  
You were Amazon warrior queens.<sup>40</sup>

In this moment, the chorus of *The Suppliant Women* could easily be the Amazons he conjectures them to be, surrounding him on every side, trapping him (even as he demands space for reflection and counsel) at the heart of an encircling tangle of branches and massed bodies.

### A Space for Refugees

This is a particularly ironic deployment of tragedy's agonistic space, since Wiles compiles a detailed argument to the effect that the centre of the *orchêstra* was the most powerful position for an actor to occupy in the fifth-century Theatre of Dionysus.<sup>41</sup> This is the spot from which it was easiest for a performer to command the attention of the whole audience, but it was also (due to the ritual associations of the *thymelê*) a tragic space recurrently associated with refugees, captives, and suppliants. If, as Wiles asserts, 'the relationship of centre and periphery was the key to democratic Greek thinking about space', then the ability of the unruly young chorus here to invert the expected power

relations of Argive territory, constraining the movement of a Greek king on his own home ground, represents a significant symbolic power shift, visually distilling the trope of embattled spatial contestation which lies at the heart of Aeschylus' drama.<sup>42</sup> It is a moment vividly illustrative of the ways in which contemporary theatre-makers can generate embodied, agonistic articulations in tragedy that are simultaneously subversive, and profoundly resonant, of ancient spatial practice.

The women continue to press their case by spatial means as well as through their insistent speech/song, their collective movements driving the king downstage until he is pressed back against the extreme edge of the thrust stage, perilously poised between the fictive space of the Argive sanctuary (triumphantly appropriated by the play's chorus) and the auditorium. The King glances back over his shoulder, registering anxiety about the likely response of the populace on whose behalf he speaks, while simultaneously clarifying the performance's implicit designation of the audience's space as 'Argos'.

In this resonant moment of agonistic spatial practice, Edinburgh finds itself standing in for the ancient city. The play's own audience is identified as an adversarial body of citizens, breathing down the beleaguered King's neck, intensifying the sense that Aeschylus' tragic dramaturgy hinges on the uneasy spatial and political co-presence of two opposed groups within a single polity.

As the drama progresses, and the women (temporarily triumphant) rest in nearby meadows, the stage is darkened and jam-jar lanterns are passed around. The chorus women's individual and collective movements through space are picked out in candlelight, so that as a new cohort of choral bodies (representing Egyptian warriors) enter the stage space, and the Danaids begin the terrified to-and-fro of their 'dance' with violent emissaries of their would-be husbands, the play's visual score is simplified to a serpentine interplay of torches and candles, patterns of flame advancing and retreating, aggressively expanding across stage space or clinging together for security.





Oscar Batterham with the Community Chorus in *The Suppliant Women*, the Lyceum, Edinburgh.  
© Stephen Cummiskey, 2016.

This dramatic sequence depends upon spectators' ability to interpret (in Wiles's terms) a succession of abstracted 'shapes', which track the interplay between two adversarial groups as they struggle agonistically for the possession and definition of contested space.<sup>43</sup> In such moments, *The Suppliant Women* functions as a compelling reminder of tragedy's rootedness in an agonistic play of space, with irreconcilable differences and mutually exclusive positions being thrashed out across the Theatre of Dionysus' dancing floor, and groups of bodies in motion re-mapping mythic confrontation as politicized contestation through the spatial practice of theatrical performance.

### ***The Suppliant Women*: Multipolar Agonism**

So far, this discussion has focused exclusively on *The Suppliant Women* as it was staged at the Lyceum, Edinburgh, but since these first performances (October 2016) the production has travelled to Belfast International Arts Festival (October 2016), Newcastle (Northern Stage, November 2016), Manchester (Royal Exchange, March–April 2017), Dublin (September–October 2017),

and London (Young Vic, November 2017). In each locale, new choruses have been recruited, playing not only the protagonist Danaids, but also their Egyptian pursuers, and the populace of Argos. The spaces occupied and contested by these different choruses have also varied significantly. The Lyceum's gilded proscenium was subverted by a massive slab of grey concrete projecting, thrust-style, into the auditorium, while wings were removed to reveal a backdrop of shadows and brickwork. Comparable spatial choices were made at the Gaiety Theatre, Belfast, but Manchester's Royal Exchange offered a very different physical environment: a seven-sided in-the-round space, situated within the shell of a lavishly decorated Victorian commercial hub. When the production was subsequently re-staged at the Young Vic, another variation was employed, with the production's trademark paving slabs marking out a small proscenium space upstage, broadening into an expansive forestage.<sup>44</sup>

Inevitably, different elements of the play's agonistic dramaturgy have worked more or less successfully in the various spaces in which it has been re-staged. For example,

Greig's version of Aeschylus' tragedy closes on an uneasy note, with the women of Argos welcoming the Danaids to the city, while cautioning them not to offend the goddess Aphrodite through their refusal to contemplate marriage.<sup>45</sup> This equivocal moment struggled to find strong spatial articulation on the Lyceum's thrust stage, where the decision to place the Argive chorus at the centre disrupted the symbolic logic of the auditorium standing in for the Greek city, while forcing the play's protagonist-chorus to the edges of the playing space, dissipating their former spatial authority.

However, this same moment of dramatic stand-off mapped perfectly on to the Royal Exchange's stage where it developed into a 360-degree face-off, with two semi-circles of performers (fitting together to form an almost circular whole) passionately articulating their point of view to an equally vehement set of dramatic adversaries, with bodies inclined forward and arms imperatively extended, as each contended to persuade the intransigent other.

*The Suppliant Women* is the only play surviving from an original trilogy that traced the story of the Danaids from their initial flight, via the fall of Argos and forced marriage, to the murder of their undesired Egyptian husbands, and the subsequent trial of a single, renegade sister (a legal contest which seems to have included a divine intervention from Aphrodite).<sup>46</sup> The extant drama (probably the first – though conceivably the second – of the Aeschylean trilogy) therefore ends on a note of unresolved tension, making it fitting that the Manchester staging's final image of two embattled choruses should powerfully identify the drama of *The Suppliant Women* as one of ongoing and unreconciled political contestation, articulated through the agonistic interplay of bodies.<sup>47</sup>

The version of the production re-staged at the Young Vic offered another variant on this explicitly agonistic close, with the chorus of Argives (here significantly outnumbering the protagonist-chorus) forming a powerful wedge centre stage, while the Danaid chorus were forced into submissive poses in each

downstage corner (ominously echoing their encounter with Egyptus' emissaries). This spatial articulation also heightened the unresolved nature of the play's close, with the protagonist-chorus beginning to fight back, beating their scarves against the ground to violently (re)-appropriate an authoritative space from which to present their defiant closing speech.

### Kinds and Contexts of Spatial Interplay

Neither of these climactic confrontations, drawing power from specific spatial dynamics of particular modern theatre spaces, replicated ancient spatial practice as it is currently understood. As discussed above, Wiles's account of the spatial drama of *The Suppliant Women* in its original performance context highlights the importance of an altar stone, marking the centre of the *orchestra*, as a focus for the sisters' occupation of Argive sacred space.<sup>48</sup> Wiles further speculates that statues of the twelve Olympians (possibly modelled on a real temple in Athens's *agora*) were physically present,<sup>49</sup> perhaps even coming to dominate the tragedy's visual field when the women threaten to hang themselves from these images.<sup>50</sup>

This vivid re-imagining of ancient spatial practice is rooted in the tangible sites and symbols of Athenian religious custom, and a set of meanings uniquely relevant to the play's place and time of origin. Yet, as Wiles has observed, the challenge of staging tragedy in present-day performance spaces needs to be understood as a collaborative process of negotiation, interpretation, and creative transformation, rather than the re-embodiment of a series of stable signs.<sup>51</sup> Considered from this perspective, the Lyceum-ATC production of *The Suppliant Women* vividly evidences the notion that the agonistic spatial interplay encoded in a given tragedy may subsequently take a range of forms, with each iteration generating its own unique spatial vocabulary in relation to the location where a play's contests and confrontations are re-engaged. Shifting the locale and context of an ancient tragedy demands the re-articulation of its agonistic spatial relations.



The Community Chorus in *The Suppliant Women*, the Lyceum, Edinburgh. © Stephen Cummiskey, 2016

This demand resonates with an important feature of agonistic theory, as articulated by Mouffe, which explicitly endorses multiple models of democratic practice, based on the differing requirements and preferences of geographically or culturally distinct populations. Proceeding from a critique of the ‘unipolar’ power distribution of international politics since the Cold War, Mouffe argues that ‘the absence of recognized alternatives’ to ‘the universalization of the Western model’ has hindered many populations from ‘finding legitimate means of expression’ for their own democratic aspirations.<sup>52</sup> In *Agonistics*, she argues for the need to ‘relinquish the claim that the process of democratization should consist in the global implementation of the Western liberal democratic model’,<sup>53</sup> instead advocating ‘a pluralist approach that envisages the possibility of multiple articulations of the democratic ideal of government by the people’,<sup>54</sup> permitting the agonistic disputes and confrontations necessary to democratic discourse to be played out in diverse ways in a ‘multipolar’ variety of locales and contexts.<sup>55</sup>

Translated into theatrical terms, Mouffe’s ‘multipolar’ model of democratic practice finds a parallel in the multiple procedures and processes by which tragedy’s agonistic space can be reactivated in a variety of settings. In a chapter exploring ‘Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices’, Mouffe challenges the view that ‘traditional forms of art cannot be critical’ and that ‘artists should avoid traditional artistic institutions’ – what she calls the ‘exodus approach’. She continues:

To believe that existing institutions cannot become the terrain of contestation is to ignore the tensions that always exist within a given configuration of forces and the possibility of acting in a way that subverts their form of articulation<sup>56</sup>

Through the explicit contestation of rules and hierarchies usually rendered invisible through the operations of political and cultural power, Mouffe advocates the transformation of institutional locations into ‘agonistic public spaces’.<sup>57</sup> Mouffe’s discussion does not directly address theatre performance, but the example of *The Suppliant*

*Women* suggests that such a development may be attempted. The spatial contestations of ancient Greek tragedy not only have the potential to ignite agonistic confrontations and passions in present-day theatre spaces, but can result in a range of extra-dramatic outcomes, differently responsive to space and context, in each host locale where the conflicts of ancient drama are re-activated.

### ***The Suppliant Women: Agonistic Contexts***

In my first encounter with the production, the chorus women's traversal of theatre space was being read as transgressive, in relation to the blue-and-gold Victorian splendour of the Lyceum, before they ever reached the stage. As a line of chorus women was sighted, briefly, running up a flight of stairs, trainers pounding and hair flying, the whispered conversation of the two impeccable Edinburgh ladies behind me registered fascinated horror at the sight and sound of these 'young girls . . . thundering'.

The anxiety that greeted the appearance of these chorus women indicates how the physical proximity of tragic performance can subvert the much-cherished 'myths' that (as Ridout identifies) commonly attach themselves to both classical drama and community participation: 'theatre and community – that's "classical"! – and theatre and community – that's "good"!'<sup>58</sup> For at least some of the assembled audience, this close encounter with a sizeable group of non-elite young women, moving, with unseemly self-confidence and speed, was experienced in more complicated and frictionous ways.

At this Edinburgh matinee – and despite a prologue which explicitly invited spectators to honour the community chorus's donation of time and labour – the presence of volunteer performers provoked agonistic tensions concerning the occupation and ownership of theatrical space. The low-level disquiet caused by their massed presence within the theatre's gilded sanctum was an agonistic manifestation intimately connected to the location, history, and politics of a given institution and its audience.<sup>59</sup> By contrast, in Manchester the presence onstage of a volun-

teer chorus prompted a different set of politicized confrontations, with a section of the production's audience making use of the Royal Exchange's online commenting system to problematize the choice to present unpaid performers within a professional venue. One commenter, self-identified as an actress, posted:

A theatre like the Royal Exchange should be encouraging paid work for the actors not cutting corners. I think it's marvellous that the volunteers have the passion and opportunity to take part, but feel this production would suit more of a community project rather than a business venture to be profiteered from.

Another added:

Three esteemed professional men, David Greig, Ramin Grey, and John Browne, stage a play with a chorus of twenty-eight women. The men will be paid for their time, the women will not. This is the aspect of the play that held the most contemporary resonance for me.

A third commented, 'a forty-strong cast where only three get paid. . . . What is wrong with this picture?'<sup>60</sup> Such critical writers did not necessarily share a political agenda, with some anxious about the impact of volunteers on pay and conditions for professional performers, while others focused on gendered disparities in pay, and another sub-group articulated concerns that amateur chorus women simply would not be up to the job.<sup>61</sup>

### **Confrontation at the Young Vic**

However, in this online controversy, the status of the Royal Exchange as a high-profile, professional theatre venue was central to commenters' concerns and arguments, evidencing the potential for such spaces to become the focus of agonistic debate in ways which significantly exceed the struggles being enacted within the narrative of a given drama, and which may manifest themselves differently in relation to the specific histories, power distributions, and political aspirations associated with each space and audience.

A different set of agonistic confrontations, which centred upon the power relations embedded in professional theatre spaces and

theatre-making practices, and the symbolic value of theatre attendance, characterized the production's London residency. In the course of *The Suppliant Women's* run at the Young Vic, it became public knowledge that multiple allegations of sexual harassment had been made against Gray (artistic director of Actors Touring Company). Responding to this news, some commentators and ticket-holders publicly announced their intention to boycott the show; others professed regret at having unknowingly entered the space of the performance, an act retrospectively understood as having undermined both personal ethical beliefs and public networks of political solidarity.<sup>62</sup>

In this context, the decision merely to step over the threshold of the Young Vic became, for some, a politically charged act, forcing would-be theatregoers to negotiate their own entry to the space in relation to a nexus of issues concerning gender inequality, the misuse of power within the theatre industry, and the silencing of dissenting or disruptive (often female) voices.<sup>63</sup> In a searching response to both the production, and its changing political contexts, critic Maddy Costa outlined the logic of her own decision to attend:

If I decided to review *The Suppliant Women* anyway, it's because I question the solidarity of silence when . . . silence offers no protection. Arguably not going might mean standing outside the theatre with a protest placard, but I decided not to do that either. Doing my job, in this instance, is more than writing about the work, the text. It's scrutinizing the context.<sup>64</sup>

While some potential audience members chose to enact political solidarity through absence, Costa's uncomfortable alertness to the implications (and, perhaps, implicatedness) of her own attendance prompted her to encounter *The Suppliant Woman* on politically engaged terms which drastically exceed the cultural package knowingly offered by the performance.

Costa's freshly 'agonized' perspective contests the (self-consciously) community-building ritual of libation as self-indulgent waste in a London borough which fails to offer adequate support to present-day sur-

vivors of domestic violence. She hears the protagonist-chorus's demand for 'equal power to all women' as an indictment of 'decades, centuries even, of feminist struggle', and its failure seriously to challenge corrosive structures of inequality. She demands to know why 'we must build cultural sympathy for the plight of modern refugees upon an ancient story about women threatened with rape, and what it means to generate empathy through that threat'.

This critique explicitly rejects notions that watching a play can (or should) heal social and political wounds, instead reading the re-performed tragedy as inciting the public re-examination of a deeply divisive question: 'What must women do to survive the multifarious insidious ways in which they are subjected to the power of men, including but not limited to sexual harassment and abuse?'<sup>65</sup> Costa's powerful response to *The Suppliant Women* highlights the ways in which the unresolved agonisms associated with contemporary political discourses can provoke essential new understandings of, and responses to, ancient tragedy, not least through the transformation of the spaces associated with re-performed plays into markers of and cues for political self-definition and public critique/advocacy.

As these localized examples indicate, Greek tragedies do not only encode agonistic spatial practice at a dramatic level. Their re-performance also has the potential to activate extra-theatrical agonistic confrontations in, and in relation to, a range of contemporary contexts and settings.

### An Agonistic Model of Tragic Performance

This discussion has identified a particular production of a single ancient drama as exemplifying some of the potentials of agonistic theatre practice in relation to the re-staging of ancient dramas. It has highlighted some of the ways in which the contemporary re-imagining of a chorus-driven Aeschylean dramaturgy allowed the agonistic spatial interactions of *The Suppliant Women* to find new articulation in a variety of contemporary theatre spaces. It has also stressed the

'multipolar' possibilities of agonistic spatial practice, and the ways in which a single production re-staged in (and in response to) multiple locales may generate multiple theatrical effects, and give rise to a variety of tensions and debates, in relation to each different setting.

On the basis of this study, it becomes possible to attempt a more ambitious articulation of what contemporary agonistic tragedy might look like and aspire to. It would focus on the intense, impassioned conflicts and struggles which drive the narratives of ancient plays and the (often) insoluble conflicts which confront their protagonists and choruses. It would be rooted in a spatial practice (or range of spatial practices) responsive to and reflective of this conflict-driven dramaturgy, and profoundly alert to the ways in which bodies (and groups of bodies) moving in space constitute the power-play of a given drama.

It would not seek a mood of unanimity or closure, but acknowledge and accentuate the open-ended questioning provoked by ancient plays. It would be a place for the expression of conflictual aspirations, desires, and passions.<sup>66</sup> It would locate ancient narratives and debates in relation to present-day crises and conflicts, without assuming a singular, consensual reading of the latter. It would potentially operate in tension with the theatre spaces (or other sites) where performances take place. And it might generate radically different tensions and confrontations in relation to the multipolar locations and contexts where it is performed and encountered.

In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière interrogates the self-imposed task, often uncritically assimilated by contemporary theatre-makers, of 'assembling a community which ends the separation of the spectacle', tracing this desire back to Plato's 'opposition between *choros* and theatre'.<sup>67</sup> According to this reading of the ancient philosopher, the 'ethical immediacy of the *choros*' at once symbolizes and constitutes good order,<sup>68</sup> and stands in opposition to the 'passivity and lie of the theatre'.<sup>69</sup>

Yet an alternative argument may be derived from Plato's anti-theatrical writings,

specifically passages depicting the degenerate and morally harmful realities his ideal choral practices are designed to remedy. In *Laws*, Plato presents the worsening behaviour of fifth-century theatre audiences as an analogue for the dangerous excesses of democracy, condemning the way audiences failed 'to refrain from passing judgement by shouting', and 'began to use their tongues', demonstrating an arrogant belief in their own capacity to judge the performances they witness.<sup>70</sup>

On this basis, Fisher (also drawing inspiration from Peter Arnott) develops a politicized conception of Athenian theatre audiences: a group 'simply incapable of quietly sitting back, of knowing their place, of dutifully attending to poetry', instead being trained to 'listen conflictually'.<sup>71</sup> Fisher envisages such a crowd as a 'veritable democratic rabble', a 'participative and unruly audience, stirred by the argumentative dynamics of the theatre'.<sup>72</sup> This alternative imagining of a fifth-century theatre audience critically destabilizes what Ridout calls 'the mythic community of the Athenian *polis*', framing the ancient theatre as a space of debate, dissension, and disunity.<sup>73</sup>

Extending Fisher's terminology of 'listening conflictually', in this article I have sought to demonstrate that re-conceptualizing Athenian tragic theatre as a space for both listening and seeing 'agonistically' potentially articulates a necessary alternative to idealizing, mythologizing accounts of ancient theatre practice, while preserving a sense of tragedy's complex inter-relations (across a range of times and places) with political debate and contest. I have also given renewed prominence to the key role which may have been played by agonistic spatial practice within fifth-century Athenian dramaturgy, revisiting Wiles's model of bodies in motion giving physical presence to tragedy's confrontational plots and (potentially irreconcilable) political contests, and re-framing this speculative reconstruction of ancient dramaturgy in relation to contemporary agonistic theory.

Re-conceptualizing Athenian tragedy as a form permeated by agonistic structures and

practices, I have countered culturally prevalent notions of ancient tragedy as a catalyst for the creation of unified, consensual audiences or communities, instead asserting the critical importance of disunity, contention, and struggle to the multi-layered and multi-polar experience of tragedy. Finally, I hope to have identified contemporary re-performances of ancient drama as a potentially important location for the activation of ‘agonistic public space’; a space in which the public contestation and adversarial conflict necessary for pluralistic democracy can be engaged among, by, and between passionately engaged present-day populations.<sup>74</sup>

In these ways, I have sought to articulate a model of contemporary tragic performance which views the plays of fifth-century Athens as inciting – if definitely un-‘ideal’ – examples of the ways in which theatre can engage with intense and open-ended issues of political dispute, licensing multiple re-imaginings of these ancient plays’ impassioned and perpetually unresolved agonisms in our own conflicted times and places.

## Notes and References

Draft versions of this article were presented at ‘Translation into Theatre and the Social Sciences’ (University of Oxford, 2017) and at a Classics and Ancient History Research Seminar (University of Liverpool, 2017). I am grateful to participants at both events for their comments, critique, and encouragement.

1. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 92.

2. This phenomenon is not new, and is identified by Johanna Hanink as dating from the third quarter of the fourth century BCE. See her *Lycurgan Athens and the Making of Classical Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 6–10.

3. Salvatore Settis, *The Future of the ‘Classical’* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), p. 102.

4. Jean-Pierre Vernant’s essay, ‘The Historical Moment of Tragedy in Greece’, provides an exemplary instance. See Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 23–8. Other examples include Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); John J. Winkler and Froma Zeitlin, ed., *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); P. E. Easterling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne, ed., *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

5. Nicholas Ridout, ‘Performance and Democracy’

in Tracy C. Davis, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 13–14.

6. Margherita Laera, *Reaching Athens: Community, Democracy, and Other Mythologies in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 212.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 43–4.

9. Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 22.

10. Laera, *Reaching Athens*, p. 203.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 211. See also Erika Fischer-Lichte, ‘Revivals of Choric Theatre as Utopian Visions’, in Joshua Billings, Felix Budelmann, and Fiona Macintosh, ed., *Choruses, Ancient and Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

12. Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 26.

13. Ramin Gray, ‘Director’s Note’, in David Greig, *Aeschylus: The Suppliant Women* (London: Faber and Faber, 2017).

14. Lyceum Theatre, ‘The Making of The Suppliant Women’ <[www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pj\\_qYUeYU2A](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pj_qYUeYU2A)>, accessed 1 November 2017.

15. For a discussion of ‘community’ choruses, see Helen Eastman, ‘Chorus in Contemporary British Theatre’, in Joshua Billings, Felix Budelmann, and Fiona Macintosh, ed., *Choruses, Ancient and Modern*, p. 374–5.

16. The premise of drama as interconnected with politics is one that is not contested by Laera. See *Reaching Athens*, p. 210–11.

17. Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 104.

18. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 7.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 6–7.

20. Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, p. 103.

21. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 6–7.

22. Paul Cartledge, ‘“Deep Plays”: Theatre as Process in Greek Civic Life’, in P. E. Easterling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, p. 11, 14.

23. Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 11.

24. Tony Fisher, ‘Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*’, in Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki, ed., *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance, and Radical Democracy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 10.

25. Edith Hall, *The Theatrical Cast of Athens: Interactions Between Ancient Greek Drama and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 354. Cross-fertilization between Athenian lawcourts and tragic writing/performance during the period is discussed more fully in Hall, *Theatrical Cast*, Chapter 12.

26. Fisher, ‘Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*’, p. 11.

27. David Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance: an Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 127.

28. David Wiles, *A Short History of Western Performance Space* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 28–9.

29. Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance*, p. 127.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

31. David Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens: Performance Space and Theatrical Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 63–6, 77. See also Wiles, *Greek Theatre Performance*, p. 104–9.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 78–9.
34. Mouffe does not directly connect agonistic theory to ancient Attic forms. Her use of the term originates in the writings of Carl Schmitt. See *Democratic Paradox*, p. 36–59.
35. Wiles, *Democratic Paradox*, p. 13.
36. The chorus-driven nature of this tragedy means that it has traditionally been categorized as ‘early’, though this view was overturned by the evidence of a papyrus (published in the 1950s) which established the drama’s first performance date as the late 460s BCE. See David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, *Aeschylus I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), p. 115.
37. Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens*, p. 71–3. Wiles, unlike some subsequent scholars (compare Hanink, *Lycurgan Athens*, p. 99), envisages the fifth-century Theatre of Dionysus as a roughly circular central performance space. See *Tragedy in Athens*, p. 23–53.
38. In Edinburgh, a full complement of chorus-women (not all volunteers were required to perform on every date) plus Gemma May Rees would mean that the group numbered thirty-seven. This massed presence runs counter to current scholarship on Aeschylus’ choruses, which holds that a twelve-strong cohort would, in practice, have represented a greater number. See Grene and Lattimore, *Aeschylus*, p. 115.
39. Grene and Lattimore, *Aeschylus*, p. 122.
40. Greig, *Suppliant Women*, p. 19.
41. Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens*, p. 66–70.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 77–8. Rush Rehm, who rejects some of Wiles’s archaeological conclusions, nonetheless identifies a ‘strong centralizing function’ in tragic spatial practice, in *The Play of Space: Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 43–4.
43. Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens*, p. 77.
44. Maddy Costa interprets the chorus’s movement out of and beyond the upstage proscenium symbolically, as showing how ‘the Suppliant Women escape the theatre of war and enter the theatre of democracy and debate.’ ‘Review: *The Suppliant Women* at the Young Vic’, *Exeunt*, 20 November 2017 <<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/the-suppliant-women-at-the-young-vic>>, accessed 20 November 2017.
45. Piecing together the degraded text of the play’s close, scholars have speculated that these lines might be allocated to the Argive king’s military attendants, or the Danaids’ (hitherto silent) female servants. Greig envisages a chorus of mature Argive women welcoming and counselling their city’s newest inhabitants. Grene and Lattimore, *Aeschylus*, p. 228.
46. See Grene and Lattimore, *Aeschylus*, p. 116–17, 161.
47. Fisher argues that the ‘tragic conception of the political’ hinges upon a comparable sense that ‘no final reconciliation of the social is possible’ within democracy, since ‘its very being consists of a ceaseless play of agonistic pressures, forces, densities and compressions’. See Fisher, ‘Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*’, p. 12–13.
48. Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens*, p. 71–3.
49. Compare Grene and Lattimore, p. 119.
50. Wiles, *Tragedy in Athens*, p. 195–7.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
52. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 19–20.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 99–100.
58. Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs*, p. 19.
59. On tensions between tragedy’s political content and prestigious venues, see Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, ‘The Expansion of Tragedy as Critique’, in Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison, ed., *Classics in the Modern World: a Democratic Turn?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
60. ‘The Suppliant Women: Have Your Say’, <[www.royalexchange.co.uk/whats-on-and-tickets/the-suppliant-women](http://www.royalexchange.co.uk/whats-on-and-tickets/the-suppliant-women)>, accessed 31 July 2017.
61. Comparable anxieties inform the trade union Equity’s ‘Professionally Made Professionally Paid’ campaign (launched in 2015). The question of whether the use of volunteer or ‘community’ performers is socially and culturally empowering or economically exploitative, is unpacked in Jen Harvie, *Fair Play: Art, Performance, and Neoliberalism* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 26–41.
62. Costa, *The Suppliant Women*.
63. For the wider context of this choice see Lucy Prebble, ‘Short Cuts’, in *London Review of Books*, XXXIX, No. 21 (2017), p. 8.
64. Costa, *The Suppliant Women*.
65. *Ibid.*
66. To examine tragedy as a series of agonistic spatial confrontations is not to deny or downplay the affective qualities of tragic situation and narrative. Mouffe is explicit in her reasoning that agonistic politics should serve as a conduit for ‘passions’ to initiate public contest. See her *Democratic Paradox*, p. 104. For a discussion of tragedy’s ability to exceed and trouble the ‘non-contradictory psychic life’ sought by Plato and his successors, see Simon Critchley, ‘Tragedy’s Philosophy’, in Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki, ed., *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance, and Radical Democracy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 29–30.
67. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 15, 5.
68. Book VII of Plato’s *Laws* discusses the role potentially played by choral performance in the ideal state.
69. Rancière, *Emancipated Spectator*, p. 62.
70. Trevor Saunders, *Plato: The Laws* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 108.
71. Peter Arnott, *Public and Performance in the Greek Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1989).
72. Fisher, ‘Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*’, p. 10. The link Plato perceives between such vocally critical spectatorship and democratic politics is encapsulated in the derogatory neologism ‘theatocracy’. Saunders, *Plato*, p. 108.
73. Ridout, ‘Performance and Democracy’, p. 19.
74. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, p. 92.