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**Ancient Greek Themes in Modern
Hispanic Theatre**

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Ancient Greek Themes in Modern Hispanic Theatre

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Abstract

Since 1986, the annual Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro (FIT) has taken place in Cádiz, Spain, and presented theater and dance companies from Spain, Portugal, and the many countries of Latin America in a variety of venues including streets and plazas, various small and experimental performance spaces, and the city's impressive 19th-century formal theater, the Gran Teatro Falla. Over the years the productions have included a broad range of original works and also works by noted authors from Western historical eras—including those of classical Greek heritage. In my paper, after a short introduction to the festival itself, I plan to discuss three of the experimental productions shown at FIT that have been based on ancient Greek works. The first is *Electra*, performed at FIT by the Spanish company Atalaya in 1996. Its text by Ricardo Iniesta was based on works by Aeschylus and Sophocles as well as modern writers. The second, *Antigona* by the Peruvian group Yuyachkani, was presented in 2000. It followed the Sophocles text with all the characters played by one actress. The third, also from 2000, is *La Iliada* which was presented by the Bolivian group Teatro de los Andes and was based on Homer's *Iliad*. My discussion will include a comparison of these works with their original sources and their modern connection with conditions and events in the Hispanic cultures within which they were adapted.

Keywords:

Since 1986, the annual Festival Iberoamericano de Teatro (FIT) has taken place in Cádiz, Spain, and presented theater and dance companies from Spain, Portugal, and the many countries of Latin America in a variety of venues including streets and plazas, various small and experimental performance spaces, and the city's impressive 19th-century formal theater, the Gran Teatro Falla. Over the years the productions have included a broad range of original works and also works by noted authors from Western historical eras—including those of classical Greek heritage. In my paper, after a short introduction to the festival itself, I plan to discuss three of the experimental productions I have seen at FIT that have been based on ancient Greek works: *Electra* by the Spanish company Atalaya in 1996; *Antígona* by the Peruvian group Yuyachkani in 2000; and *La Iliada* by the Bolivian group Teatro de los Andes, also in 2000. My discussion will include a comparison of these works with their original sources as well as their connection with conditions and events in the Hispanic cultures within which they were adapted.

The forerunners of FIT de Cádiz were festivals in Colombia, Venezuela, and other Latin American countries that, in the late 1970s, began to include Spanish theatrical companies and works and the presentation of Latin American performing groups in Spain beginning in the early 1980s. The exchange of such artistic endeavors makes sense because of the shared history, cultures and languages of the Iberian and Latin American worlds. In 1985, José (Pepe) Bablé, director of a noted puppet theater in Cádiz, and Enrique del Álamo, director of a Cádiz cultural organization, began plans for what would become the first European festival devoted to Ibero-American theater and dance.¹ The first FIT (October 18-26, 1986) included performances of almost 30 groups from different countries.² By the 29th annual festival in 2014, hundreds of companies, artists, and works had been presented over the years. Professor Emeritus Juan Villegas, important Latin American theatre scholar, has noted that FIT de Cádiz provides researchers, critics, and artists with the opportunity to study and experience theatrical endeavors from the vast Ibero-American world in one place rather than having to travel from country to country to see individual companies and productions.³ In the title of an article published in 2007, he characterized FIT de Cádiz as “un sueño para el investigador de teatro latinoamericano y español” (a dream for the researcher of Latin American and Spanish theatre).⁴

A Spanish company that has a long history of presenting works in many international venues is Centro Andaluz de Teatro – Atalaya which was founded in 1983 in Seville by director Ricardo Iniesta. Its mission includes research and training for the theatre as well as the staging of productions. The company collaborates with Territorio de Nuevos Tiempos (Territory of New Times [TNT]) which was founded in 1994 as the first private international theatre

¹Portillo 1995:13-15; Ortega Cerpa 2005:11-13.

²Portillo 1995: 16-17, writes 29 groups from 20 countries. Ortega Cerpa 2005:107-121, lists 28 groups from 15 countries.

³Villegas 2005:39.

⁴Villegas 2007:1.

research center in Spain.¹ The company performed their *Elektra* at the 1996 FIT. Presented at the formal Gran Teatro Falla, it was directed by Ricardo Iniesta. The text, developed by his brother Carlos Iniesta, was drawn not only from the works of the ancient Greek Aeschylus and Sophocles, but also from the more recent writings of Heiner Müller and Hugo von Hoffmannsthal. Between 1996 and 2004, this work was presented in more than 150 cities in Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas.²

The stage design, performance characteristics, and structure depart dramatically from conventional presentations. As Atalaya's *Electra* opens, the audience sees 40 stationary plastic bathtubs that form the back wall, and 12 metal ones which can be moved by the actors into different horizontal or vertical positions as the play progresses. Single actors or chorus members variously sit, stand, lie down in, or peer out of the tubs. As noted by theatre scholar Ernesto Pierre Silva, at different times in the play, a bathtub may function as an image of a cradle, a coffin, a baptismal font, a uterus, a sepulcher, or something else.³ The metal moveable tubs are, in a sense, as active and expressive as the actors themselves. In addition to representing various entities, when they are moved, they add percussive sounds to the chanting, the music, and the pounding of sticks on the floor by the chorus members. In the last scene, the cast enters carrying tall flaming torches with which they perform movement patterns reminiscent of Greek folk dancing as they are speaking the final passages of the text. The torches become extinguished and the play ends with all the actors endlessly whirling in the manner of Sufi dervishes. This finale to the dire tragedy functions to create a feeling of transcendence and joy.

A major company from Peru that has been performing frequently at FIT since the first festival in 1986 is Yuyachkani. Its name is a Quechua word that translates as "I am thinking" or "I am remembering." Founded in 1971 in Lima, the company has been a "collective of artists that conceive of theatre as a political action and an investigation of the culture." They engage in "workshops in marginalized communities" and are committed to "furthering the rights of citizens."⁴ Their production of *Antigona* was presented at FIT in 2000. This free adaptation of the Sophocles play by the Peruvian poet, José Watanabe was directed by Miguel Rubio Zapata and performed by Teresa Ralli, who portrayed the title role as well as all the other characters: Creon, the Guard, Haemon, Tiresias, and the Narrator (whom we discover at the end is Antigone's sister Ismene).

While Yuyachkani's *Antigona* is based on the Sophocles play, it differs from the original in its visual and imaginary setting, its treatment of space and time, and its presentation of the characters.⁵ The setting, rather than being the open air Greek theater of the past or even a modern proscenium stage with a

¹Patronato 1996:63; Patronato 2008:101.

²*boleTiNT 2004*.

³Silva 1997:133.

⁴Diéguez in Patronato 2008: 77. My translation from Spanish.

⁵Description comes from the article I wrote after seeing the work: Ruyter 2001: 129-32.

sense of spaciousness, is a tightly enclosed space in an intimate “black box” theater that represents Antigone’s tomb or the cave where she met her death. It seems to suggest an enclosed memory that is occurring within the characters during the 77 minutes of the play, although referring to the long range of events that make up the story. For each character that Ralli portrays, she adopts particular characteristics, and a transformation from one character to the next is indicated by various means (often in combination): a statement in the text; a sound cue—such as a loud clap made by the actress; musical cues or interludes; different ways that Ralli uses her voice and body; changes in her spatial location; her movement through space; ways of wearing or manipulating the long, sleeveless robe that serves as both a costume piece and a prop; different uses and placement of the one chair that is on the set, which serves as both a piece of furniture (to sit or stand on) and a prop that can represent the body of Polynices being held by Antigone or bars of confinement.

The two women of *Antigona* are presented very differently than they are in the Sophocles original. In the Yuyachkani version Antigone appears to be filled with terror and grief along with her resolve to bury Polynices despite the consequences. She illustrates her fear in her distorted body language, voice, and weeping. In contrast, Ismene seems to be focused and in control—despite admitting to some fear. Her body is centered and relaxed; her voice is normal; and she speaks and moves with a sense of authority. However, in both the traditional play and this unconventional version, both women are victims of war and of losing a loved one and are faced with narrow choices in the context of their society and its values. The work relates closely to contemporary problems. In an article published in *Diario de Cádiz*, both Rubio are quoted as relating the theme of *Antigona* to present day conflicts in Peru and other parts of the Americas.¹

The third work to be discussed is *La Iliada: El poema de la fuerza* written and directed by César Brie, an Argentinian actor, director and writer who worked with Eugenio Barba and the Odin Teatret in Denmark for ten years before moving to Bolivia where he established the Teatro de los Andes in 1991.² Brie’s *La Iliada* was presented at FIT in 2000. It relates the story of Homer’s epic using some of the actual text from that work as well as passages from the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, *Hecuba* and *The Trojan Women* of Euripides, and *Cassandra* by the 20th-century East German writer Christa Wolf. The production was dedicated to a Bolivian and an Argentinian who were assassinated during political conflicts.³

In this production, 9 actors play 31 roles that include male and female gods and mortals—some of the latter great heroes and others.⁴ It was performed in a large gym-like facility of the university with the audience seated on both of the long facing sides of the playing area. The actors of Teatro de los Andes were required to master a wide variety of performance techniques including those of

¹“Antigona es una herida sin cerrar”, *Diario de Cádiz* (27 October, 2000), 48.

²Muñoz 1995:140-141.

³Patronato 2000:26.

⁴Description comes from my article after seeing the work (Ruyter 2001:128, 132-139).

dance, singing, the playing of musical instruments, acrobatics, martial arts, etc. And the production included everything from Bolivian folk music to the Indian genre of Bharata Natyam, which was the characteristic movement of the Athena character

As the other two works discussed here, *La Iliada* deals with war and its consequences and particularly with the suffering of women in the context of war. The humans, women and men, are depicted as serious and tragic figures, while, except for Athena and Apollo, the gods and goddesses are presented as ludicrous characters whose words, vocal qualities, and movement bring comic relief in contrast to the intensity of the scenes depicting mortals. Brie's script generally follows the story narrated in Homer's *Iliad*, but the frame, its opening and closing, differs in a significant way. While Homer's epic begins and ends with men, Brie's adaptation begins and ends with women and their experiences of loss. It opens with Hecuba, wife of Priam and mother of Hector, reminiscing on how happier times had been destroyed by war and ends with the thoughts of the three women who had lost major family members in the war—Cassandra, Hecuba, and Andromache,. There is then a final statement by Priam reminiscing about the happier times when there was peace.

All three of the companies discussed here are committed to improving their cultures and the world with their theatrical creations. They all have strong social consciousness and dedication to their art and to their social responsibility. They are very clear in their opposition to war, and create works that effectively communicate the evils and tragedy of war and killing.

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