

MYCENEAN POLYTOPE

It was to be the premiere of a work entitled *Mycenean Polytope*, by a leading Greek composer whose name escapes me. Posters promised it would involve a live orchestra, three hundred soldiers, torches, and narrations, and would be attended by the Premier of Greece. It was expected that reviewers would come from major European newspapers.

Premonitions grasped us when we arrived at the parking lot in Mycenae, a grazing field rented for the occasion. The bus had to maneuver around some thirty black goats and sheep, belled and bearing lights. Most of the animals had paired off and were butting heads together in slow motion, oblivious to the screaming men who were trying to direct them into an enclosure. It was lovely to watch, but did not promise well for the music. Those who had paid more than we had seats on bleachers precariously erected on the slope of the Charadros ravine, somewhat below the citadel of Mycenae, and facing Mt. Zara. The rest of us were directed to their left where we sat on blankets on the ground with picnics and watched the chartered buses arriving with luminaries from Athens. There was applause for the President and Prime Minister.

It was an interesting performance, but I felt inadequate. A great deal of the music emphasized the atonal and arhythmic, as well as the ugly. More of the music involved what seemed intended to be rams' horns blown for an attack or for authenticity of atmosphere, but it came through the amplifiers like Cyclopean farts, which is how the audience responded.

There were not three hundred soldiers with torches, as promised on the posters, but maybe there were seventy raw recruits from the Nauplion barracks, and they had not rehearsed climbing on and off archaeological sites in the dark. Unfortunately, the walkie-talkies they were using for their coordination broadcast on the same frequencies as the amplifiers for the orchestra so we heard a great many instructions, frustrations, and discussions of personal sexual habits and ancestry. Meanwhile, someone possibly associated with the performance was intoning from Mycenaean Linear B clay documents, consonant-vowel syllables -- *da-mo-ko-ro-po-ro-ko-re-te* -- or perhaps not those precise syllables, but it hardly mattered since Linear B is lists of livestock and jobs. During this, instruments in the orchestra made little whoops and bleats, with occasional shrieks which occasioned additional feedback in the speakers and a great many responses from the black sheep.

Then someone else began intoning, "Menin aide thea." I was immensely cheered to find something I recognized, although the cheer was brief because the orchestra's part showed no signs of improvement and the narrator gave every impression of being able to continue through the whole twenty-four books. There was considerable intonation from the narrator about Achilles, which seemed odd as he never had anything to do with Mycenae, but we assumed the *Iliad* was still going on. Meanwhile, the torches were lit, or such torches as could be managed in a rising wind -- more antiphony from the soldiers here -- and we whispered among us that perhaps we had reached the burning of Troy. The black goats and sheep with their bells and lights were unleashed and driven up the slope of Mt. Zara -- this we learned later was intended to represent the hopes and aspirations of mankind -- momentarily splendid to behold, but surely disappointing to the composer as some of them began like we to go astray, and the ruder sorts in the audience gave forth with shepherd whistles, many of them and contradictory, which tended to confuse the sheep and brought some few back down the slope where such as could be collared and turned around were driven forth again. The livestock in Homer, as

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best I could recall, was generally being eaten. We heard the next week that the two performances of *Polytope* had occasioned hard feelings among the sheep-owning population of Mycenae, many of whose animals continued to be missing.

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A caravan appeared on the waterfront at dusk, painted a lumpy yellow, barely held together by string and rope. It was pulled by a car of the 1930s, also painted yellow, with a naked girl flying from the prow, and an airplane fin on the roof. The caravan was papered with posters saying *Doctor Antonia – O Megalos Magos*, which extolled his abilities in *telepatheia*, *ipnotismos*, and *mageia*. The caravan had all sorts of things strapped onto it -- a bicycle, chairs, cooking pan, a rabbit cage -- but because all of them were broken or badly worn, and the rabbit cage was empty, it was not, at first sight, something that promoted confidence. There was, on the whole, a general impression of someone who would be leaving town soon and barely ahead of the police.

O Magos gave a show the next night, though the term 'gave' is incorrect as we paid a shockingly high admission. It was in the Turkish mosque on the main plateia, transformed in the 1920s into a theater by some genius who created dreamy murals of nymphs, and on the dome, a god of light bursting forth in a horse-drawn chariot, surrounded by garlands and posies. The Magos had equipment of the most shabby kind: his oriental robe was the sort of caftan sold to tourists, the beautiful girl assistant was his wife who was too discouraged to comb her hair, the skimpy cotton stage curtains failed to meet in the middle. I was willing to suspend belief for the Magos who had an aristocratic profile and harried mien: he did pull a rabbit out of a hat, and put it back; he lay back on a bed of nails; he hypnotized his wife and sawed her in half, though we were not convinced she was hypnotized; he located a red ball in various places about the persons of volunteers from the audience, and he showed himself able to identify cards someone had selected from a deck that he had shuffled. It was pathetic, it was tawdry, which is to say: it was probably the same sort of show that villagers have been watching ever since the beginning of shows.

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Posters along the main street announced that a travelling company would give two performances of *Oedipos* in Palamidi. At sundown, I climbed the steps up the face of the escarpment at sundown, a long way in the baking heat that had been collecting all day; the children had all counted the steps --according to whom you were speaking, there were 936, 988 or 1,000. I had a long wait until the performance, so I wandered through the various bastions of this Venetian fortress, seemingly build under the inspiration of Piranesi for its angled walls and slanting staircases and cells within cells. The courtyard of one bastion had a small, uneven wooden travelling stage; the audience was gathering on the few benches, or the ground, or rocks in the courtyard of one of the bastions. We waited. Everyone talked to everyone else. From where we sat, we could see lights from the hill at Argos, from Nea Kios at the head of the bay, from scattered houses in the fields, from car lights on the road that followed the rim of the bay.

People worked on the stage, trying to make it level on the rocky ground. Others set up screens at the back of the stage, and on the slope behind and below the stage. The ground was rocky and uneven, there was much coming and going and stumbling, then most of them went behind the lower screen. Raised voices, sudden quiet, then a match.

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The dusk had become dark now; some of the audience were smoking; there were fireflies in the grass, and flickering lights out beyond us in the Argolid, on fishing boats in the bay. The chorus came up the hill in the dark and stood before the stage.

The actors were not very good, they spoke too loudly and gestured too broadly; Oedipos looked like an aged matinee idol, he and Jocasta wore entirely too much makeup, the costumes were faded and much-mended, the few props had been repaired again and again. There was too much light on the center of the little stage, and not any light anywhere else. Yet, it was a sacred occurrence; for an hour and a half, these people created a universe, and broke our hearts.

Most of the audience of a hundred or so whom I recognized were the more educated citizens of Nauplion, there were two courting couples, and the jeweler and his wife from the balcony opposite ours. I sat on the grass, which turned out to be a mistake because it concealed some sharp-edged stones, and beside lounged me was Nauplion's professional scoundrel and black sheep, a man who sold household necessities from a barrow he pushed through the streets. Every community has a person who carries its sins: he it was who gave short weight and short change, and did it each and every time, and when caught, would laugh and shrug as if to say, You can't blame a guy for trying. He was constantly the butt for jokes and a target for scolding. I had bought something from him; it broke in the assembly; when I took it back to him, he laughed at me, but the incident seemed to make us friends, for whenever he saw me or the girls, he called to us and gave us candy. He was utterly and absolutely transfixed. At first, knowing I spoke little Greek, he tried to whisper very simplified explanations of what was being said, but it was not long before he was so engaged in the problem that he had to listen. He sat up erect, then he moved onto his knees and crept forward as the evening went on.

Because of my limited understanding of Greek and my distate for histrionics, I gave him more attention than the stage. Surely, this scoundrel was the only person in Greece who did not know the plot of *Oedipos*. Then this scoundrel was the only person in Greece who experienced the catharsis Aristotle would have us know. The discoveries shocked him profoundly; he turned to me, horrified, pointing, "Did you hear that? Did you *hear* that?" He moved closer to the stage. "*Ti?*" What? what! "*Oxi!*" No! He knelt at the stage, thunderstruck, then he reached back to me, pounding on my knee, "*Afti ine i mitera tou! Afti ine i mitera tou!*" She is his mother! He looked around to see if others in the audience recognized the horror.

Jocasta's death was difficult for him. He moved back and clutched my arm. We sat together through Oedipos's blinding, and those terrible final speeches, and as Oedipos went off into the darkness of the castle walls, we were both weeping.

This was my first performance of *Oedipos*; I had encountered it in a college course, and in Freud, and I had joined in the usual student discussions. In the years since, I have seen *Oedipos* at Epidauros, and at Kennedy Center, in various films and little theaters, but that evening, within the walls of the Venetian fortress, with the lights of the Argolid for a backdrop, this shabby little company uttered a preposterous story written by a man 2,300 hundred years ago and utterly shattered this dreary little fraud of a man, and through his awe, shattered me.

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The amphitheatre of Epidauros follows the shape of the hills all around, so that it is a natural focus from which to observe all the world, and what happens in the circle of the stage is a distillation of what is happening out beyond the hills and the dusty blue evening and the velveted pines. After we took our seats, there was an interminable wait. Once a small owl called, its bell-note warped toward the finish. Then there was a burst of

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applause and the theatre cupped a moment of silence: the chorus were walking in pairs up the brown slope behind the stage, they were wearing the greens and browns of the pines, the needles and cones on the ground and the earth at dusk. Men's voices came out of the dark, calling to each other antiphonally and there was a slight echo across the theater, as of something heard in another life. Then the Chorus came on to the stage circle in two rows, fourteen images of a single figure walking thoughtfully, a movement that was a rite. Each of the fourteen had three shadows, and the shadows wove about each other until the stage was enmeshed in a web or a spell that caught the evening to itself.

The Chorus spoke as one voice, neither speaking nor singing, but with overtones and undertones that suggested infinite possibilities of mind:

You cannot call him back from the river of Hades
That all must cross, with weeping and lamentation

.....

Time is the sacred healer

.....

People in the audience smoked; clouds of smoke drifted into the spotlight beams, the glow of cigarettes across the circle of the theater golden punctuations to the Chorus. Elektra was small, crouched on the steps, standing vulnerable and alone, her voice no woman's voice but a conduit for every anguish: "*Alimou! Alimou!*"

It was terrible, the fullness of that cry out of emptiness, and she enveloped the urn, cradled it, crooned to it, rocked it, poured onto ashes every frustration of wasted tenderness. Then the inevitable recognition, "*Esai?*" Is it you? burst impatiently from her fatigue, released our cumulative tensions. The play proceeded, each scene shorter than the one before, events speeded up, moved inexorably to the terrible end with Clytemnestra shouting in panic from within, Elektra crying in fury without, Aegisthos moving in terror to his doom. No one stopped him from action before, no one will stop him now from his death. This play lays out the facts, as if diagramming a sentence: there is no protection from the sentence we lay on ourselves.

Going back to Nauplion on the bus, we overheard other impressions:

"Well, you see, Freud had the Oedipus complex for men, and the Elektra complex for women, that's because Elektra, you know, made too big a deal of her father... ."

". . . actually, in the Classical Drama, one would not have heard the Chorus as we did. More correctly, the Chorus would have danced and sung their parts . . ."

"Well, I just didn't like all that interest in killings. So unpleasant."

". . . when Callas was as Epidauros . . ."

Conversations about Epidauros eventually lead to conversations about Callas. She came to Nauplion once, with Onassis, on the yacht. They and the local press hired taxis and raced to Epidauros. Kyriakos Kalkanis is a local stringer for every newspaper anyone might ever have heard of. He described to me Callas standing alone in the center of the circle of the theater of Epidauros, her hands shaping something in air. A sight to have given many a sense of awe, but Kalkanis strode onto the stage, he said, took her arm and said, "Miss Callas, do you want to sing here?"

She replied, according to him, "I have the voice," – he enacted her gesture pointing like so to his throat – "but I have not the theater." He wrote the story, the press took off with it; the next year Callas was scheduled to sing *Norma*. The gods were not best pleased: there was unheard-of, unseasonal thunder and lightening, a massive thunderstorm, and neither of the two scheduled performances could be given. The next year, she was rescheduled; boats were run from Piraeus to the port nearest Epidauros to

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transport the crowds. Whenever I stopped at the Tourist Office in Athens for tickets to some performance or other, the man would always sigh and say to me, "You should have been here when Callas was at Epidauros."

When Callas was at Epidauros An elderly lady in Hartford told me: "I met Lawrence of Arabia," a former missionary from Kenya said, "I met a man who knew Livingston," and my mother described seeing Lindberg step out of The Spirit of St. Louis. Of such is the apostolic succession.