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***IPHIGENIA IN AULIS* AT LA MAMA:
MICROCULTURE AND MUSICALITY
IN THE WORK OF GARDZIENICE**

Ben Spatz

The Staniewski/Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices returned to La MaMa in New York City for three weeks in October 2007, with its new work based on Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*.¹ The company also spent an evening at the CUNY Graduate Center where director Włodzimierz Staniewski showed video documentation and spoke about the ensemble's past work. Having lived and worked with Gardzienice for nearly a year in 2003–2004, I am grateful for the opportunity this visit provided to review and rearticulate the ongoing value of the group's work.

Gardzienice has been a major player in Polish experimental theatre since the 1970s. They remain today one of the most important Polish theatre companies, and one of those that most frequently represents Polish theatre abroad. This is one context within which to situate their work. Another relevant context is that of performative research focusing on ancient Greece; *Iphigenia* is the company's third production drawn from ancient Greek sources, following their *Metamorfozy* (after Apuleius) and *Elektra* (after Euripides). Taken together, these three pieces represent a unique investigation into the lost musical and gestural forms of ancient Greece. Since the early 1990s, Gardzienice and its associated artists have been working to reconstruct both the music and the *chironomia* (gestural forms) of Euripides' era, based on the fragmentary evidence that survives on papyrus and painted pottery. The resulting vision of ancient Greece is entirely unlike other representations of antiquity, the most significant difference being that Gardzienice (re)places music and spectacle at the heart of their performances, ranking them above narrative and character, and thereby inverting the classical Aristotelian hierarchy.

I want here to briefly place Gardzienice in a third context, parallel to and separate from both its role in Polish theatre and their performance-archeology of ancient Greek sources. Equally significant, I would argue, is Gardzienice's epitomization of the unique potential of long-term ensemble work. As theatre continues to fight for support, recognition, and



Włodzimierz Staniewski, Artistic Director,
Staniewski/Gardzienice Centre for Theatre Practices

independence in a world increasingly dominated by electronic media and capitalism, Gardzienice's work continues to demonstrate the irreplaceable value of theatrical processes that do not fit inside the commercial frame of a theatre "industry." My experience of long-term ensemble-based theatre, both as a performer and as a spectator, has led me to understand that the operation of such groups is completely different from that of repertory, Broadway, or even Off-Broadway houses. Indeed, the differences are so great that I wish better language existed to distinguish these two theatrical modes. Not only the economics and developmental processes but also the artistic results of ensemble work are radically different from those that arise out of the more common model.

The dominant model has individual artists coming together for specific projects and splitting up afterwards. This gives artists the opportunity to work in a wide variety of circumstances over time and with many different people. In this way a horizontal kind of creativity is fostered—one that asks: what happens when *this* actor is combined with *this* director, *this* designer, and

this playwright? Such a *combinatorial* system produces new works more efficiently (in the capitalistic sense) because of the natural creativity that springs from the formation of each new temporary ensemble. Indeed, the new combination of artists is itself understood to substantially determine a creative project's identity and significance.

The combinatorial system of artistic production has advantages and disadvantages like any other. Among the latter is the fact that in order to allow artists who have not worked together before to collaborate relatively quickly on new work, the combinatorial system requires a foundation of shared assumptions to underlie the entire broad community of theatre artists. This underlying shared culture necessarily limits the depth of artistic investigation and the scope of what is considered a viable art-making process. The overall time frame of collaboration, the relationship between director and performers, and anything having to do with actor training or the development of new techniques—all these are significantly constrained by the underlying culture that makes combinatorial theatre possible.

Gardzienice and other long-term ensembles work differently. Within the company's narrower focus, and over a period of years or decades, it becomes possible to present onstage a truly *other* culture and an *other* world. This other world is not the world of ancient Greece (to which any play can explicitly refer) or the culture of Poland (which is equally visible in Polish repertory theatre) but the unique world of Gardzienice's own microculture, which has been developed by Staniewski and his partners over the past thirty years.² The Gardzienice microculture consists not only of the company's performances and aesthetics but also of their training methods, expeditions, folk ethnography, and other performative research. This rich, experiential history is made visible in their performances, which are not only artistic compositions but also the result, ultimately, of something like a *way of life*. While many revivals of ancient Greek works use the language of today's mainstream to refer to what is deeply foreign, Gardzienice's actually contain and present a unique foreignness of their own. One witnesses, in the company's work, not a mere reference to otherness but its palpable, embodied presence.

One sees this quite clearly in *Iphigenia*. Like all of Gardzienice's productions, *Iphigenia* seamlessly integrates nonlinear narrative fragments with visual, physical, vocal, and instrumental compositions in a ferociously



Gardzienice's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, directed by Włodzimierz Staniewski, La MaMa, October 2007



Gardzienice's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, directed by Włodzimierz Staniewski, La MaMa, October 2007

rhythmic and energetic explosion of the underlying myth. The text is spoken in Polish, English, and ancient Greek, and each facet of the performance is tightly orchestrated within a driving score of original music. Gardzienice is a theatre of musicality, but it is neither a concert nor a dance. It is not ritual, but it is linked to ritual in that it seeks to restore the broken links between music and the body. The intensity of the performance's microcultural genesis is evident in its defiance of generic categories. This is not a performance that could have been created within the combinatorial logic of commercial theatre; it is simply too intense, too extreme, too precise, too different. Although some of the performers are relative newcomers, the aesthetic and the *way of working* made visible in this production are the product of a decades-long continuity.

Music is central to Gardzienice's work, but Staniewski's vision of *musicality* is not only about music. It is also about rhythm, color, dynamics, the musicality of the body, and even the musicality of the plot. One does not have to know the myth of Iphigenia to be firmly imprinted by the flashes of image and narrative that Gardzienice offers. There is the matched fury of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in heated argument, the blossoming love of Achilles and Iphigenia, the rise of crippled Iphigenia from her chair to claim the glorious destiny of death, the ablutions of naked Achilles in preparation to defend her from her fate, Iphigenia's throat cut, Clytemnestra's anguished cry, and, finally, Iphigenia herself dancing away to death or to heaven. Some of these images do not even appear in Euripides' play, but in this production they shine more brightly than the narrative structure, which serves to support them. All of this is difficult to describe in words because it is sustained throughout by the massive presence of the chorus—which includes all the performers who are not at any given moment playing a particular figure—kneeling over drums or dancing a wild combination of kung-fu and reinvented *chironomia*. This *Iphigenia* is an almost overwhelming vision of the musicality of the human body in all its "means of expression" (Staniewski's term). It is a volatile but undeniably vital synthesis.

Of course, Gardzienice is not a fixed point, and continuity in their work does not mean that nothing changes. Today Staniewski and lead actor Mariusz Gołaj are the only company members who remain from the 1970s, while the rest of the ensemble covers a great span of age and experience. The breadth of this span is rendered poignantly visible in the first scene, a dialogue between Agamemnon and his servant, who in Euripides is an old man but here



Gardzienice's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, directed by Włodzimierz Staniewski, La MaMa, October 2007

is played by Justyna Jary, one of the youngest women in the company. Jary began working with Gardzienice in 2003, when I did, and the transformation she has undergone since then is striking. She is still the same person, but it is as if there is now somehow *more* of her taking up the same amount of space. She has been opened, intensified—lit up in some way from within. This change is not the result of working on a single project but of being gradually integrated into the fabric of Gardzienice over several years and in several different capacities. The contrasting and virtuosic partnership between Jary and Gołaj is a revealing image of Gardzienice's rich history alongside its future potential, and a strong model for a kind of apprenticeship that young actors find less often in commercial theatre.

Skeptics may point out that an actor forged in the microcultures of ensemble theatre may not easily fit into the rest of the theatre world if and when they leave their group of origin. This is because ensemble theatre is not a machine with replaceable parts of the kind that capitalism seems to demand. For me, that only underscores the value of such work and makes it, as Staniewski likes to say, radically “ecological.” Although *Iphigenia* is the company's first piece to use prerecorded music, its second to use video projection, and its third to amplify the performers' voices through microphones—marking a clear progression toward the integration of theatrical technology—the heart of Gardzienice's work would still exist at full force if the power were cut. Take away the electricity and the Gardzienice ensemble would still effect a complete transformation of the performance space.

I do not think it is going too far to suggest that, in our time, the cultivation of such raw, unaugmented human capacity has significant ecological—and therefore political—implications. It also goes against the grain of most contemporary theatre, which is endlessly cyborging itself through multimedia integration. In this, and in many other ways, Gardzienice remains an invaluable island of microcultural difference in an increasingly monocultural world.

**For reading on Gardzienice's work, see: Paul Allain, *Gardzienice: Polish Theatre in Transition* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1997); Tadeusz Kornaś, *Włodzimierz Staniewski i Ośrodek Praktyk Teatralnych Gardzienice* (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Homini, 2004); Włodzimierz Staniewski, with Alison Hodge, *Hidden Territories: The Theatre of Gardzienice* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004); Zbigniew Taranienko, *Gardzienice: Praktyki teatralne Włodzimierza Staniewskiego* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Test, 1997).

NOTES

¹ The company of *Iphigenia* was led by Mariusz Gołaj and Joanna Holcgreber, and included Maniucha Bikont, Charlie Cattrall, Karolina Cicha, Anna Dąbrowska, Benedict Hotchins, Justyna Jary, Tanushka Marah, Agnieszka Mendel, Marcin Mrowca, Jacek Timingeriu, and Barbara Wesołowska. Original music was by Zygmunt Konieczny; lighting design and operation by Grzegorz Podbiegłowski; sound operation by Maciej Znamierowski; costumes by Monika Onoszko; and choreography by Julia Bui-Ngoc. See the archives at www.LaMama.org for more details. I want to express particular appreciation for the work of Joanna Holcgreber, a senior company member whose essential performances in all of Gardzienice's Greek-sourced productions have received less critical attention than they deserve.

² These considerations place Gardzienice in the context of other ensemble performance groups, such as the Wooster Group, the SITI Company, or Double Edge Theatre in the United States. Of course, any thorough analysis of Gardzienice along these lines should be complemented by an understanding of their work in relation to both Polish theatre and theatre from ancient Greek sources.