

British Theatre Guide

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Odysseus: Red Rhapsody X

Homer

Meth'odos Theatrical Research Group

Hellenic Centre

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This was a chance to catch a relative rarity: Homer delivered in Ancient Greek with musical accompaniment. Was this what it sounded like thousands of years ago when people first heard it?

Perhaps, but that isn't what this production sets out to do. The circumstances are very different and this presentation is a piece of contemporary theatre with all its technology of sound and lighting, we are not sitting around the fire in the megaron, but perhaps it does capture something of the spell that was cast by an ancient teller of stories.

In this 50-minute performance, Greek actor and director Yiorgos Panteleakis presents the section of the Odyssey known as *The Slaughter of the Suitors* (or *Rhapsody 22*). It is near the end of the saga when Odysseus, returning to Ithaca after a 20-year absence, finds his palace full of men who have been plotting to steal his throne and kill his son and brutally sets out to reclaim what is his. It begins when Odysseus' faithful wife Penelope has set up her husband's great bow and lined up 12 axes as a challenge.

Here Panteleakis, as narrator Homer, plays all the roles in the story: Odysseus, his son Telemachus, the goddess Athena (dressed as Mentor), and several suitors. He speaks the original Ancient Greek text, which is translated into Modern Greek and into English for transmission as surtitles.

There is no setting, just the room of the performance with an improvised instrument, a modern *phorminx*, centre rear flanked by light stands and loudspeakers for the music. After the house light dim, a deep growl is heard behind the audience and Panteleakis moves through them as Homer, a deep throated, animal resonance accompanied by stamping feet, words slow and syllabic, not easily comprehensible.

There is no one to lead him as he moves into the centre. Short and bearded, clad in black, his head turned upwards so that we see the whites of his sightless eyes, he reaches out as though to identify and make sure of the space. "Then Odysseus tore off his rags," he begins.

First he fires an arrow from his great bow, which no one else has been able to handle, clear through the space between those axes. Then he shoots Antinous, most prominent of the suitors.

Odysseus may be thought of as hero but this is a tale of a merciless massacre, 50 minutes about killing but the feeling is more ritualistic than murderous. As the deep voice follows the rhythms of classical prosody, it feels like fate rather than bloodlust.

Legs apart and knees bent, he stamps out rhythms with his heels. He moves up to the instrument and plucks its strings. It looks nothing like the ancient *phorminx*, which was halfway between lyre

and kithara, but six stretched metal strings that he will pluck, hit with a metal bar or vibrate with a bow, another coiled metal spring with a resonator box and a percussion pad that he will beat on. They all operate through electronic amplification and there are controls that probably alter pitch and at one point seem to produce a repeated phrase.

Panteleakis acts out the dying in stylized fashion, clutching where struck, rolling on the ground or stretched out. It is half mime and half dance with moves that could come from Tai Chi. As Odysseus argues with his enemies or instructs his son and their few supporters, it is still the voice of Homer; perhaps there is some differentiation for each character but the verse always identifies the speaker. This isn't dialogue, however dramatic, and the playing (made very clear in the projected translation) is performed less for sense but with the emphasis on feeling.

It is not always clear what is going on. One sequence without text seems to consist of self-throttling; whatever it means it looks very dramatic. Perhaps it is linked to an idea spelled out in the programme that Odysseus is not just killing enemies but ritualistically removing faults in himself. Significantly, the names of the suitors can be seen as symbolic: Antinous (against reason), Agelaus (herd behaviour); they are errors of thought or of action that he removes on the way to self-awareness.

This is worth seeing just to hear the extraordinary voice Panteleakis produces, the vibrant instrumentation and a charismatic performance. It is not theatrical archeology but a contemporary take that tries to imagine creating things for the first time now as others did thousands of years ago.

There were times when I was reminded of Greek theatre performances many decades ago by Alexis Minotis or under his direction in which a somewhat similar delivery sounded archaically artificial at a time when Karolos Koun was bringing fresh life to Greek theatre, but Panteleakis adds a commitment and a colour that is exciting. It might not be suited to drama for a modern audience but this performance is theatre with a personal style that rivets the attention. Meth'odos experiments seem to be worth looking out for.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)