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The Abject Trapped in Language:

Contemporary Stagings of the Myth of Phaedra—Kleczewska, Zadara, Wiśniewski

Abstract

This article presents a comparative analysis of three contemporary stagings of the myth of Phaedra: by Maja Kleczewska (Teatr Narodowy, Warsaw 2006), Michał Zadara (Narodowy Stary Teatr, Cracow 2006), and Grzegorz Wiśniewski (Teatr

Wybrzeże, Gdańsk 2019). The theoretical framework refers to the abject quality of the character of Phaedra and its representation in language. The author analyses the directors' interventions in literary texts reworking the myth of Phaedra, strategies ranging from multiplication, through modification, to annihilation of the dramatic text. In Kleczewska's intertextual staging, which juxtaposes different plays addressing the theme, the text and the language become less important than the actors' physicality. Zadara's ironic theatre deconstructs the discursive formation of Racine's classical tragedy, while retaining it as the main subject of the performance. Wiśniewski returns to Racine's language, but tries to transcend it, counterbalancing it with quiet, restrained acting, enhanced by strong musical phrases. The three stagings resonate with the concept of the theater as a laboratory of crisis, here: of the crisis of the abject.

Keywords

myth of Phaedra, abject, language of drama, mise en scène, Maja Kleczewska, Michał Zadara, Grzegorz Wiśniewski

Abstrakt

Abiekt uwięziony w języku: Współczesne inscenizacje mitu Fedry w teatrze polskim—Kleczewska, Zadara, Wiśniewski

Artykuł przedstawia analizę porównawczą trzech współczesnych inscenizacji mitu Fedry wyreżyserowanych przez Maję Kleczewską (Teatr Narodowy w Warszawie, 2006), Michała Zadara (Narodowy Stary Teatr w Krakowie, 2006) i Grzegorza Wiśniewskiego (Teatr Wybrzeże w Gdańsku, 2019). Ramę teoretyczną rozważań stanowi koncepcja abiektałności postaci Fedry i jej reprezentacji w języku dramatu. Przedmiotem analizy są reżyserskie interwencje w teksty literackie podejmujące mit Fedry: strategie ich multiplikacji, modyfikacji i anihilacji. W intertekstualnym przedstawieniu Kleczewskiej, zestawiającej różne powiązane z tematem dramaty, tekst i język stają się mniej istotne niż ciała aktorów. W ironicznym teatrze Zadary formacja dyskursywna klasycystycznego tekstu Racine'a zostaje poddana dekonstrukcyjnej analizie, ale staje się zarazem głównym tematem przedstawienia. Wiśniewski powraca do języka Racine'a, ale próbuje go przekroczyć, kontrapunktując go wyciszoną i oszczędną grą aktorską wzmocnianą kilkoma mocnymi frazami muzycznymi. Trzy analizowane przedstawienia wpisują się w koncepcję teatru jako laboratorium kryzysu, w tym przypadku – kryzysu abiektałności.

Słowa kluczowe

mit Fedry, abiekt, język dramatu, inscenizacja, Maja Kleczewska, Michał Zadara, Grzegorz Wiśniewski

Phaedra is abject, the spawn of an evil god, denying herself the right to exist. Her dominant characteristic is a poignant sense of abashment, coupled with the inability to move away from the cause of the shame. The situation of double entanglement, both in the violence of the social norm and in the violence of the emotions in equal measure ruins the human identity structures. This makes up the origin-situation of Phaedra's tragic figure, which was brought to the stage by the Greek poet Euripides two-and-a-half thousand years ago. An emergence of this type of figure in the Greek mythical imagination, and Euripides's attempts at its stage and literary mediation, involved transgressing taboos regarding female sexuality. The poet himself staged the situation of Phaedra twice. The first version, preserved fragmentarily, and not yet fully studied, called *Hippolytus Kalyptomenos* (Hippolytus Veiled), was rejected by the Athenian audiences as an unacceptable transgression. It is presumed that in this version, Phaedra, who was in love with her stepson, pursued her erotic desires with full determination and this shamelessness in transgressing norms was not appreciated by the Athenians.¹ In a subsequent stage version of the same story, Euripides made Phaedra less shameless and more tormented,² creating the tragic nature of this character as an abject character aware of her ethical subjectivity.³ Staged in 428 BCE, the play, called *Hippolytus Stephanophoros* (Hippolytus Crowned), won the dramatic contest, supporting the thesis that in the public perception of the time, Phaedra's abjectness had to be balanced by her ethical subjectivity for the audience to perceive her situation as tragic. Written later in literary form, Euripides's play became the dramatic Ur-text for all later versions of the story.⁴

¹ As Michel Foucault has rightly observed: "If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of deliberate transgression," Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 6.

² Seweryn Hammer, *O wpływie tragedii Eurypidesa "Hippolytos" na poezję hellenistyczną* (Poznań: Gebethner i Wolff, 1921), 5.

³ For a detailed analysis of the myth of Phaedra as adapted in the plays of Euripides, Seneca, and Racine, see Małgorzata Budzowska, *Phaedra: Ethics of Emotions in the Tragedies of Euripides, Seneca, and Racine*, trans. Adrianna Grzelak-Krzymianowska (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012).

⁴ Euripides, "Hippolytus," in *Children of Heracles, Hippolytus, Andromache, Hecuba*, ed. and trans. David Kovacs (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 124–265. There is another play, dating from the dramatic legacy of antiquity, by the Roman philosopher Seneca, titled *Phaedra*, which was probably based on Euripides's model and Sophocles's lost play titled *Phaedra*. Cf. Seneca, "Phaedra," in *Tragedies*, vol. 1: *Hercules, Trojan Women, Phoenician Women, Medea, Phaedra*, ed. and trans. John G. Fitch (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 437–553.

In the modern reception of Phaedra's tragic situation, the most prominent was the classicist 17th-century drama by French poet Jean Racine,⁵ which was published in 1677, in Paris. It is this version that is the primary reference point for modern theatrical interpretations of the myth. Racine introduced a major plot change to the ancient paradigms of Euripides and Seneca, which affected the balance of power between the characters and the framing of the tragic. Most importantly, he modified the stage character of Hippolytus, stripping him of his misogynist features, and having him share Phaedra's suffering, resulting from the experience of illicit love. To this end, Aricia's character was introduced into the drama, which Racine adopted from Roman mythology, nevertheless, inserting her into a new tragic situation. Given the complex mythic background of this character, who in the Vergilian view is an emanation of the cult of Diana (Artemis),⁶ the tragedy of Phaedra as seen by Racine, paradoxically, remains within the idea of Hippolytus's carnal innocence, for the son of Theseus offers his love to the asexual goddess Aricia-Artemis. He ceases to be a misogynist; instead, he becomes a worshiper of a love that renounces touch. Racine does not play out this relationship in a literal sense, but he makes the Athenian princess a counterbalance to Phaedra's offensive passion, entangling Hippolytus in an infatuation through Aricia's icy gaze.

In Poland, after 2000, the myth of Phaedra was staged in dramatic theater three times,⁷ with two productions in 2006, one by Maja Kleczewska and one by Michał Zadara, and the third in 2019 by Grzegorz Wiśniewski. These three performances differ in almost everything except the subject matter. However, they all represent distinct attempts to address the abjectness of Phaedra and the language of its representation, and at the same time, they also differ in ideas for the formal treatment of the tragic situation on stage. They can also be perceived

⁵ Jean Racine, "Phaedra," in *Britannicus, Phaedra, Athaliah*, trans. C. H. Sisson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 73–135.

⁶ Aricia is mentioned by Virgil in the *Aeneid* (Virgil, *Aeneid VII–XII, Appendix Vergiliana*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 7:761–762), where he identifies her with Hippolytus's wife. In Roman mythology, Hippolytus, under the name Virbius, was a god of the forest, living near the town of Aricia in the Lazio region. For the ancient Romans, this town was an important place of worship of the goddess Diana Nemorensis, the counterpart of the Greek Artemis. However, no ancient source, Greek or Roman, mentions Aricia as the daughter of the Athenian Pallas, defeated by Theseus, thus forming the canon of her plot in Racine's version. Most likely, Racine took this character from Boccaccio's 14th-century *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium*, extremely popular at the time, serving as a compendium of mythological knowledge, in which Boccaccio, casually correcting ancient authors on Hippolytus's alleged virginity, describes Aricia as an Athenian aristocrat and Hippolytus's lover. Cf. Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogia Deorum Gentilium Libri, a cura di Vincenzo Romano* (Bari: Editore Laterza, 1951), 10.50.

⁷ The staging of the one-act opera *Phaedra*, by Dobromiła Jaskot, is worth mentioning here (dir. Maciej Prus, conductor Wojciech Michniewski, scenography Paweł Wodziński, prem. April 7, 2006, Teatr Wielki—Opera Narodowa, Warsaw).

as three different voices in the discussion on the status of Polish contemporary theater, which attempts to define its *modus operandi* in the context of the postdramatic turn.⁸

Kleczewska's Intertext

By basing her staging⁹ on a collage of works taking on the myth of Phaedra, including the ancient dramas Euripides's *Hippolytus* and Seneca's *Phaedra*, and contemporary dramas Per Olov Enquist's *Till Fedra (To Phaedra)*¹⁰ and István Tasnádi's *Fédra Fitness (Phaedra fitness)*,¹¹ Maja Kleczewska overturned the dominant role of the text in favor of the performance. She merely suggests the myth's extensive reception tradition and took the liberty of directing various textual variants. According to Patrice Pavis's typology,¹² this would therefore be an intertextual staging that, in an attempt at "demarcating in a polemical way its differences from the other solutions,"¹³ becomes a variation on pre-existing works. Such collage-like attempts are accompanied by the inevitable decomposition of texts, what Pavis calls *mise en pièce/s*,¹⁴ and what Erika Fischer-Lichte describes as textual *sparagmos*.¹⁵ Maja Kleczewska's theater implements this formula, especially in stagings of ancient dramas. The director used a similar intertextual collage in her semi-opera *Oresteia*, in which she used seven texts of

⁸ Cf. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. and introduction Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006).

⁹ *Phaedra* after Euripides, Seneca, Enquist, and Tasnádi, dir. Maja Kleczewska, scenography Katarzyna Borkowska, music Adam Falkiewicz, prem. December 2, 2006, Teatr Narodowy, Warsaw.

¹⁰ Per Olov Enquist, *Dramatik: Tribadernas natt; Till Fedra; Från regnormarnas liv; I lodjurets timma* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 2014).

¹¹ István Tasnádi, *Fédra Fitness* (Budapest: Palatinus Kiadó, 2010).

¹² Patrice Pavis, *Analyzing Performance: Theater, Dance, and Film*, trans. David Williams (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 213–214, <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.10924>.

¹³ Pavis, *Analyzing Performance*, 214.

¹⁴ Patrice Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scène: Staging Theatre Today*, trans. Joel Anderson (London: Routledge, 2013), 211.

¹⁵ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Thinking about the Origins of Theatre in the 1970s," in *Dionysus Since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, ed. Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 341. Fischer-Lichte repeatedly reiterates the idea that the stage form should be independent from the text, pointing out that theater is not an art derived from literature, and the stage work should be evaluated or analyzed *per se*, not *per analogiam* to the text of the drama: "It is to miss the point to interpret the text, even the version used in the performance, and use this interpretation as a yardstick for judging the meanings generated by the performance. . . . Neither the original play text, nor any particular version of it, can serve as a yardstick for judging a performance of an ancient play," Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Performance as Event: Reception as Transformation," in *Theorising Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice*, ed. Edith Hall and Stephanie Harrop (London: Duckworth, 2010), 35, 40.



Danuta Stenka as Phaedra. *Phaedra* dir. by Maja Kleczewska

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culture, from Aeschylus to David Hare, which had different genre provenances, from drama to TV series, as the intertextual base of the performance.¹⁶ In her *Bacchae*,¹⁷ on the other hand, Euripides's text reverberates on stage mainly in trance-like fragments of the chorus's chanting, also performed in the original Greek version, but most of the play's script is made up of fragments added

¹⁶ *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, dir. Maja Kleczewska, scenography Katarzyna Borkowska, choreography Cezary Tomaszewski and Anna Szaśiadek, music Agata Zubel, conductor Wojciech Rodek, prem. April 14, 2012, Teatr Narodowy, Teatr Wielki—Opera Narodowa, Warsaw. Maja Kleczewska points the following texts for the textual basis for her *Oresteia*: the dramas *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, *Iphigenia in Aulis* by Euripides, and *Macbeth* by Heiner Müller, as well as literary works of non-obvious genre: Heiner Müller's *Description of a Picture* and Christa Wolf's *Cassandra*, Ingmar Bergman's TV series *Scenes from a Marriage*, and the screenplay of the film *The Hours* by David Hare.

¹⁷ *Bacchae* by Euripides, dir. Maja Kleczewska, installation "Unionizing the Polish Parliament" Jonas Staal, costumes Konrad Parol and Sandra Korzeniak, music Cezary Duchnowski, prem. December 7, 2018, Teatr Powszechny, Warsaw.

by the director and playwright, Łukasz Chotkowski. Therefore, it seems that Kleczewska reaches for ancient dramas rather to extract the tragic situation from its structured form, and not stage a text, but a new tragic situation in which the mythical *semper ubique* is subjected to theatrical (formal) and social (contextual) revision of *hic et nunc*.

Consequently, in *Phaedra*, Kleczewska invalidates any textual mediation of suffering, focusing on the actors' bodies and thus communicating the issue of enslaved female sexuality. In this approach to Phaedra's tragic situation, the heroine confronts the world with her demand to "privatize" her bodily desires and free them from the domination of the male gaze. The fact that Phaedra becomes embroiled in an erotic infatuation with Hippolytus is her own subjective decision, while that she becomes the object of the male gaze and the touch of Teramenes and Theseus is a violent action from which she tries to free herself. Kleczewska clearly follows the idea of this character proposed in Enquist's drama, an *expressis verbis* dedication to a woman (*To Phaedra*), in which the author reveals several shocking images of the enslavement of female sexuality in the modern world. All the same, Kleczewska, who to a smaller degree takes on his text, instead focuses on the *modus* of the character's existence contained within it, as well as on the theme of female corporeality derived from ancient myth.

Given that the Euripidean Ur-text version of the myth of Phaedra proposes a highly dialectized language for this character, in line with the rhetorical and staging *prepon* (*decorum*) of the time, while the Racinesque classicist version, framed in an alexandrine line and adhering to the principle of propriety (*bien-séance*), gives a highly subversive language for Phaedra, the question of the stage representation of Phaedra's abject existence is crucial. Phaedra, as an abject, becomes trapped in a language that sublimates her moral failure. Thus, paradoxically, language becomes for Phaedra a safeguard of her ethical subjectivity. Through language, she attempts to express and organize her struggle with passion. However, equally likely it becomes a form of enslavement, one with which the heroine cannot come to terms. Her attempt to linguistically structure her own abjectness ends in madness and a suicidal gesture.¹⁸

By freeing Phaedra from the language of her former representation, Kleczewska strips her of this ethical entanglement, and introduces her into a new tragic situation, the focus of which is the enslavement of the female body by violent

¹⁸ Cf. with the comment by Jean-Luc Nancy: "And a twofold failure is given: a failure to speak about the body, a failure to keep silent about it. A double bind, a psychosis. The only entry into the body, the only access regained at each of its entries, is an access of madness," Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans. Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 57.



Danuta Stenka as Phaedra.
Phaedra dir. by Maja Kleczewska

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narratives of masculinity. Danuta Stenka, as Phaedra, plays mainly through the body, exposing it, by using explicit sexual gestures. Michał Czernecki, as Hippolyte, provokes her with his nudity. The meeting of the two on stage ends, for her, with a humiliating attempt at fellatio. Kleczewska sublimates nothing. She shows the destruction of a woman's erotic desires *in crudo*, filling the play with scenes of madness in its various guises, played out in the aesthetics of a "wet" theater of blood, sweat and bodily exhaustion.¹⁹ The only moment in the play where Phaedra hides within language is the first scene. Dressed in an elegant gown, complemented by long red gloves, wearing a wide-brimmed hat, and shielding her eyes behind dark glasses, Phaedra proclaims in Euripides's words her desire to take part in the hunt, which is Hippolytus's field of activity.

¹⁹ Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scène*, 234–235.

The monologue is preceded by a long silent scene in which the actress stands in a proud pose, holding two leashed greyhounds. Kleczewska only leaves this one quote, suggesting Phaedra's ethical subjectivity, while in the rest of the production she plays out only her abjectness as a woman activating her sexuality against the norm. This form of distribution of accents in the staging allows the director to explore the suffering of bodies that elude the structures of language. Acting outside of language, immersed in the aesthetics of this wet theater, becomes a graphic expression of female suffering, dissected in "panic mode."²⁰ Phaedra's suffering becomes the result of her erotic infatuation with Hippolyte, a consequence of "a lover's stupidity,"²¹ making the subject abject in a situation of transgressing the norm. Kleczewska refuses to appease Phaedra's insanity, allowing her to express her suffering through the medium of a body freed from discourse.

In contrast, the two other stagings clearly gravitate towards the text, doggedly exploring the limits of the language of drama's tenacity in a theater that makes the body the leading subject. Both Zadara and Wiśniewski formally stage Racine's text, yet their productions are set apart by a formal and conceptual divide, yet united by a male perspective of the abject female's suffering. Stagings of the classics, as Brecht already noted in the 1950s, drift between two extremes—traditional-style productions on the one hand, and formalist productions on the other,²² but in both cases, the works are doomed to fail. Meanwhile, Zadara and Wiśniewski are both pursuing their own paths through a vast continuum between these extremes.

Annihilation of Text in Zadara's Theater

Racine's use of language is the key to his vision of theater, in which everything is played out precisely in language, and *mythos* is realized mainly through

²⁰ Cf. "Today, more than ever, our discord with the world is expressed in a 'panic mode' (Sloterdijk), which is born at the intersection of the paths set by Aristotle, Artaud, and Brecht, and which at the same time, crosses the horizon of these traditions due to the direct brutality of horror, devoid of the soothing procedures of subjectivization or aestheticization," *Słownik dramatu nowoczesnego i najnowszego*, ed. Jean-Pierre Sarrazac et al., trans. Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera (Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2007), 75.

²¹ Cf. "What is stupider than a lover? So stupid that no one dares offer his discourse publicly without a serious mediation: novel, play, or analysis (between tweezers). . . . Like the Nietzschean ass, I say yes to everything, in the field of my love. . . . I persist in a dutiful, discreet, conformist delirium, tamed and banalized by literature," Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 177.

²² In Willett's translation "traditional style of performance" versus "formalist 'renewal' of the classics," Bertolt Brecht, "Classical Status as an Intimidating Factor," in *Brecht on Theater: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (London: Eyre Methuen, 1964), 272.



Barbara Wysocka as Aricia and Tomasz Wygoda as Hippolyte. *Phaedra* dir. by Michał Zadara

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lexis. For Lehmann, this is purely dramatic theater,²³ while for Artaud, it is an anti-theatrical activity.²⁴ As Mary Reilly notes, Racine’s “theater of words,” in which characters theatricalize their actions through speaking, is comparatively as violent as Orwell’s Newspeak, and maybe even more disturbing, because it conceals a moral failure in its rhetorically sublime alexandrine line:

Limitation and elimination are the fundamental principles governing Racinian language. Perhaps the next time we read one of Racine’s tragedies, rather than being swept away by our enthusiasm for the spoken word, we should

²³ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 34.

²⁴ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 84.

pause and indulge in a little doublethink, in that we should surely think twice about the status of Racinian language. The chilling fact is that language is shockingly, skillfully and systematically brought to the brink of destruction in a so-called “theatre of words” and it is done so subtly that often we don’t even notice it is happening.²⁵

Zadara²⁶ undoubtedly senses the nature of the language of Racine’s drama and attempts to deconstruct it, focusing his play not so much on the theme of Phaedra’s abjectness, or her ethical subjectivity, but on the discursive formation²⁷ of the French drama. Thus, he formally departs from Kleczewska’s “wet” body theater, presenting an intellectualistic “dry” theater²⁸ lined with irony and metatheatrical self-reflection. Racine’s language binds and disciplines Phaedra’s body, thematizing and gentrifying erotic infatuation. In his production, Zadara successively dismantles this linguistic formation; however he doesn’t orient towards the body, but weighs the political of Racine’s classical discourse. It is Racine’s language that is the main protagonist of this staging. As the director points out:

I draw from classical texts, because of the power within them, they’re perfect and can be interpreted in various ways. . . . The process of depriving words of already recognizable meanings, this process of anarchizing the meanings is actually the objective.²⁹

The anarchization of Racine’s discourse thus forms the essential dramaturgical axis of Zadara’s staging of the myth of Phaedra.

John Coltrane’s improvisational jazz music, heard in the performance, reflects the variational nature of the play, at the same time becoming a crucial stage character: by allowing Racine’s words to resound in a variety of tones, in declamation, screeching, shouting or phrases, and thereby “depriving” the words of their pre-established meanings, the director destabilizes the discursive formation of

²⁵ Mary Reilly, *Racine: Language, Violence and Power* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), 122.

²⁶ *Phaedra* by Racine, dir. Michał Zadara, scenography Magdalena Musiał, choreography Tomasz Wygoda, music Michał Zadara, prem. April 1, 2006, Narodowy Stary Teatr, Cracow.

²⁷ Discursive formation, in this view, is the logical organization of language acting as the expression of thought, manifesting itself in different modalities. For Foucault, “discursive formation” defines the rules for forming and the functioning of individual discourses, each of which constitutes a certain system of authority. A deconstructive analysis of a given “discursive formation” allows for the recognition of the specifics of a given discourse, that is, the rules for generating meanings that monopolize the idea. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 38.

²⁸ Cf. Pavis, *Contemporary Mise en Scène*, 234–235.

²⁹ Michał Zadara: *Geniusz prowokator?*, dir. Elżbieta Sitek (TVP S. A. Oddział Wrocław, 2007), www.zadara.pl/film.



Agnieszka Mandat as Phaedra and Tomasz Wygoda as Hippolyte. *Phaedra* dir. by Michał Zadara

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Racine's drama. Thus, he shows the language representing the tragedy of Phaedra as a violent construct, hiding the abjectness of desires that cannot be structured in language. Moreover, the composition of Zadara's play is also variationist in nature. It is dominated by scenes individualizing the characters, whose names are displayed on the stage in moments when it belongs only to them, albeit they are also interposed with collective scenes of their encounters and background scenes of side characters, during which subtitles are displayed—"intermission 2 min." This format, seemingly in line with the structure of Racine's drama, brings to mind the musical notation of a jazz improvisation:

The form (language and plot arrangement) and theme (love) for this stage impression is dictated by Racine's drama, but its harmonic scheme is created by

the director, who shapes chord sequences, which are consonant or dissonant, related or unrelated, main and side.³⁰

By creating his harmonic scheme for Phaedra's enunciatory situation, Zadara actually subjects Racine's text to a profound deconstructive analysis, even if he does so in a lightly ironic form, which is certainly helped by using Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński's highly interpretive and exalted translation. Paradoxically, by disrupting Racine's text, the director reveals the impossibility of phrasing the essence of the myth of Phaedra, defined in terms of erotic madness. In Zadara's staging, as in Kleczewska's production, there is no place for the ethical subjectivity of Phaedra sheltering in language.

Anna R. Burzyńska points to the intellectual discipline and emotional restraint, a tendency to rationalize and dialectize experience, as the foundations of Zadara's theater.³¹ Having said that, it is also a theater that juxtaposes a suchlike defined approach of Brechtian provenance with moments of theater of the absurd, whereas disciplined intellectual analysis reduces the studied phenomenon *ad absurdum*. Zadara's theater doesn't find solace in the dry, appealing to the intellect, v-effect. It rather gravitates toward pessimistic conclusions of indeterminacy and ambiguity, both formal (aesthetic) and ontological (ethical). Hence, in his *Phaedra*, each character has a grotesque dimension, having their tragic situations portrayed in a parodical deformation. The actors' bodies³² are mirrored in a shiny reflective film that lines the floor and walls of the stage, boosting the effect of their chaotic indeterminacy. The intentional posturing and pervasive sarcasm are the two dominating factors of the performance, burning Racine's text in the fumes of absurdity. In his next Racinesque staging, the director will go even further and rewrite, together with Paweł Demirski, Racine's text, titling it *Iphigenia: A New Tragedy* (based on Racine's version) (*Ifigenia: Nowa Tragedia [według wersji Racine'a]*).³³ This new version of the plot,³⁴ which modernizes the myth of Iphigenia by introducing it into contemporary contexts, again ridiculing

³⁰ Małgorzata Budzowska, *Sceniczne metamorfozy mitu: Teatr polski XXI wieku w perspektywie kulturowej* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2018), 196.

³¹ Anna Róża Burzyńska, "Myśmy wszystko zapomnieli! Dialektyka narodowej pamięci i zbiorowej amnezji w teatrze Michała Zadary," in *20-lecie: Teatr polski po 1989 roku*, ed. Dorota Jarząbek, Marcin Kościelniak, and Grzegorz Niziołek (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2010), 61.

³² Agnieszka Mandat as Phaedra, Błażej Peszek / Tomasz Wygoda as Hippolyte, Barbara Wysocka as Aricia.

³³ *Ifigenia: Nowa tragedia (według wersji Racine'a)* (Iphigenia: A New Tragedy [based on Racine's version]) by Zadara and Demirski, dir. and scenography Michał Zadara, costumes Julia Kornacka, music Dominik Strycharski, prem. June 27, 2008, Narodowy Stary Teatr, Cracow.

³⁴ Paweł Demirski and Michał Zadara, "Ifigenia: Nowa tragedia (według wersji Racine'a)," in Paweł Demirski, *Parafrazy* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Krytyki Politycznej, 2011), 175–228.

it on stage, confirms that the sting of Zadara's derisive criticism is not directed at Racine's drama, but at all grand narratives that falsify human experience and enslave non-normative objects. Thus, the main theme of Zadara's theater is the politics of discourse, the verbal conditions of the possibility of expressing human suffering, and particularly its limitations. The anarchization of the discursive formations of dramatic form takes place in his theater at the intersection of tragedy and comedy, when laughter remains the only likely response to the absurdity of all attempts to linguistically structure suffering.

The Intransigence of Text in Wiśniewski's Theater

The text-bricolage in Kleczewska's play, and the breakdown of Racine's text in Zadara's production, are directorial procedures fully in line with the concept of post-dramatic theater. Kleczewska and Zadara refuse to face the challenge of bringing the text to the stage, as they invalidate it a priori, and confirm its remnants or destruction with stage actions. By using this approach, the essence of Phaedra's tragic situation, defined by the aporetic relationship between reason and passion, is obliterated, while the vectors of stage cogitation are directed towards issues of the sexual emancipation of the female body, or the negation of the conditions of the possibility of expressing suffering in language. Wiśniewski,³⁵ on the other hand, accepts Racine's text as a full-fledged poetic medium for Phaedra's suffering, but deploys the "enunciatory situations"³⁶ on stage in such a way, as to avoid the trap of "traditional staging,"³⁷ at the same time penetrating the unreflective discourse of the object who "persist in a dutiful, discreet, conformist delirium, tamed and banalized by literature."³⁸ Phaedra's object lover's discourse, trapped in Racine's alexandrine line, repeating the sophisticatedly dialectized language of Euripides, is revealed in Wiśniewski's performance. This happens in moments when Racine's phrase is broken, sometimes by silence, other times by sound. Wiśniewski, unlike Zadara, does not deconstruct Racine's language, but puts it to a stage test, examining the endurance of words paired

³⁵ *Phaedra* by Racine, dir. Grzegorz Wiśniewski, scenography and costumes Mirek Kaczmarek, music Agnieszka Stulgńska, prem. April 6, 2019, Teatr Wybrzeże, Gdańsk.

³⁶ Cf. Pavis, *Analyzing Performance*, 205: "Mise-en-scène is not dictated by a reading of a text alone; however, readings do provide practitioners with suggestions for an experimental and progressive placement of enunciatory situations—in other words with a choice of 'given circumstances' (Stanislavsky), which propose a perspective for an understanding of the text, activate a reading of it, and generate interpretations."

³⁷ Cf. footnote 22.

³⁸ Barthes, *Lover's Discourse*, 177.

against suffering bodies. It seems that the analysis of Racine's organization of language (discourse), in Wiśniewski's performance, is aimed at capturing the materiality of this discourse, as Foucault puts it:

The analysis of the discursive field is oriented in a quite different way; we must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes.³⁹

By making this assumption, one can situate Wiśniewski's approach as the so-called "ethical turn in culture," when "the most important question became how to behave in the face of the otherness of the text, and thus how to read it so as not to destroy its specificity, how to respond (while reading) to the idiom of the text."⁴⁰ Racine's poetic idiom is, in essence, the Other in contemporary theater, the Other rejected as drama, the Other rejected as an archaic language, imbued with poetic expression *in sublime*, incongruous with the contemporary language of violent expression *in crudo*. The director undertook the exploration of the poetry of Racine's language within a framework which takes advantage of the qualities of Antoni Libera's translation.⁴¹ Whilst indeed abstracting the poetry of the French alexandrine, this translation reveals the ruthlessness and severity of Racine's phrase, in comparison with Boy-Żeleński's earlier poetically exalted translation.

In essence, the tragedy of Phaedra's situation is enclosed in her inability to speak her desires to the world. Already in Euripides's Ur-text (*The Hippolytus*, v. 394), silence was a way to deal with one's abjectness, as long as it remains unexposed to the world, for the individual can function in their subjectivity. In Racine's version, Phaedra reveals her desire to die in silence when she accuses Enona of squandering her chance to avoid disgrace (*Phaedra*, v. 837–838). The dialectics of quietness and silence constitutes the *modus operandi* of Racine's plot of Phaedra's tragedy, especially as it considers an obscure God and his reticence, who abides in silence in the face of human suffering.⁴² Wiśniewski follows this pattern in his staging, deploying the enunciatory situations of characters

³⁹ Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, 28.

⁴⁰ Anna Burzyńska, *Dekonstrukcja, polityka i performatyka* (Kraków: Universitas, 2013), 124.

⁴¹ Jean Racine, *Fedra*, trans. Antoni Libera (Warszawa: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 2011).

⁴² Racine introduces into his tragedy, with the ancient mask of Venus and Helios, the idea of a Jansenist God, hidden and silent, whose grace man can hope for but cannot deserve. Cf. Budzowska, *Phaedra*, Chapter 4.



Jakub Nosiadek as Hippolyte. *Phaedra* dir.
by Grzegorz Wiśniewski

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voicing Racine's text in silence, rarely used in contemporary theater. Incidental, isolated sounds, or offstage whisperings, come to enhance this muted effect. The bodies of the actors playing the lead characters are also quieted, a far cry from the blatant corporeality in Kleczewska's production. Even though Wiśniewski's *Phaedra*, played by Katarzyna Figura, sheds her elegant gown, remaining in a black petticoat, and ending up naked in a see-through coat; Hippolyte, portrayed by Jakub Nosiadek, plays with an exposed chest and barefoot; and Aricia, played by Katarzyna Dąlek, enters the stage in her underclothes, even though corporeality remains demonstratively withdrawn in this performance. Initially, Katarzyna Figura's (Phedra's) body is focused and in a closed expression, but as the tragic situation tightens, it disintegrates into gestures of aggression toward the world and herself. Nevertheless, there is an interesting conflux regarding the solutions used in the first of *Phaedra*'s scenes in Wiśniewski's and Kleczewska's

plays. In both, Phaedra stands in silence, dressed in an elegant gown, wearing dark glasses covering her eyes. However, this is an apparent coincidence, for Kleczewska's Phaedra stands in a proud, relaxed pose with a slight grin on her face, while Wiśniewski's Phaedra stands focused, without a slightest trace of emotion. Significantly, the corporeality in Wiśniewski's performance is not hidden under the mask of a role, even though this is strictly dramatic theater. While remaining withdrawn, it continues to reveal itself through gestures and glances. Racine's "infinite and sterile conclave"⁴³ of language encloses the actors' bodies only up to a point. The "cage"⁴⁴ of language attempting to represent that, which should be silenced, ties the bodies in a deliberately sparing play of acting gestures, but only to the point of an outburst and the disintegration of the body striving for self-destruction. Through the positioning of the actors' bodies, the director unfolds a clash of erotic desire and a language vainly trying to tame and express it. Phaedra cannot hide in this language, because her passion does not belong to the order of rational syllogisms.

Therefore, Wiśniewski's play should be considered an attempt to transcend Racine's language. It is moved from a discursive formation to a meditative one, towards a theater which "is without discourse, but instead dominated by mediation, gestuality, rhythm, tone."⁴⁵ Although the staging is dominated by Racine's extended phrases, there are also sounds that disturbingly break up the verbal structure: whisperings from offstage, the sound of a bow rubbing against a percussion cymbal, or the ticking of a metronome resonating with the omnipresent silence, introducing an additional space of extra-discursive, meditative reflection, specifically one that allows not so much to "think," as to "feel" the world. At the same time Wiśniewski does not give up on playing out the moments of emotional outburst which cannot be structured into words. The performance begins with a deafening percussion intro, played by Hippolyte so furiously that the audience physically can feel the vibrations caused by the music. After such a disturbing introduction, the viewer is thrown into a silence of words and bodies, only to hear Hippolyte's powerful percussion solo again, this time amplified by his scream when the character cannot find a verbal way to express his anger. Similarly expressive is Phaedra's *kommos*, shared along with Aricia, to whom the director has most prominently given the qualities of an asexual goddess, identical to the Greek Artemis. Phaedra's despair, realizing

⁴³ Barthes claimed that every tragedy is an "infinite (and infinitely sterile) conclave," Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publication, 1983), 7.

⁴⁴ *Conclave* (Lat.): enclosed space, room, see *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1968).

⁴⁵ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 25.



Katarzyna Datek as Aricia and Katarzyna Figura as Phaedra. *Phaedra* dir. by Grzegorz Wiśniewski
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the failure of her ethical subjectivity, is juxtaposed with Aricia's disturbingly performed aria *What Power Art Thou (Cold Song)* from Henry Purcell's *King Arthur* semi-opera. It is an intriguing directorial strategy, in which Racine's seventeenth-century language, being a verbal attempt to express but also enslave desire, is juxtaposed with a seventeenth-century musical piece⁴⁶ which expresses a plea for death.

Wiśniewski, as the only director discussed here, captured the abjectness of Phaedra through the perspective of Aricia's character. Enquist had already highlighted Aricia's icy fridity as a negative of Phaedra's offensive passion. However, by juxtaposing the two heroines in one scene, Wiśniewski does not play out their trivial rivalry over a man, but again, he shifts the cogitation

⁴⁶ The premiere of Purcell's semi-opera took place in 1691 at The Dorset Garden Theatre in London.

to a meditative level, expressed by the essential phrase in Purcell's aria, "Let me freeze (again to death!),"⁴⁷ whispered from offstage, just about from the beginning of the play. As Aricia sings, Phaedra falls silent, violently striking against the corroded steel wall surrounding the stage, producing additional audible effects.

Bringing Racine's text to the stage, Wiśniewski fractured its discursive dominance with such audial semantics as silence, single sounds, and a few powerful musical phrases. The finale of the performance is played out through Phaedra's silent monologue, taken by the director from the middle of Racine's drama. The monologue, ending with the word "shame," focuses on the essence of Phaedra's tragic situation, and sums up Wiśniewski's staging approach, in which Phaedra's abjectness is balanced by her ethical subjectivity. The director undoubtedly avoids post-dramatic tendencies in his theater, rather attempting to invent new forms of expression for dramatic texts, namely, deploying enunciatory situations in such a way as to allow "a choice of 'given circumstances' (Stanislavsky), which propose a perspective for an understanding of the text, activate a reading of it, and generate interpretations."⁴⁸ In almost every one of his performances, Wiśniewski proves that he is most interested in what Antonina Grzegorzewska called "the fecal meat of human despair."⁴⁹ In addition to overt cruelty, beyond any sublimation, which he showed in *Plastelina* (Plasticine),⁵⁰ he all too often discusses issues of cruelty festering under the smooth forms of convention and language (*The Damned*),⁵¹ or subversively sheltering itself in brutal language (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*).⁵² It seems that abjectness, as an experience through which every human will sooner or later have to go, with a sense of disgust towards themselves and the world, is a fundamental theme of his theater. This is why he emphasizes Phaedra's abjectness in the language of her suppression, without turning away from or ridiculing the classicist phrase.

⁴⁷ The libretto for Purcell's *King Arthur* was written by John Dryden.

⁴⁸ Pavis, *Analyzing Performance*, 205.

⁴⁹ "In protest in regards to the exaltation towards the regions of great art, I enjoy men who hang themselves on doorknobs, the fecal meat of human despair, and lunatics who bang their heads against the wall and rush to the table at every dinner invitation," Antonina Grzegorzewska, "Ifigenia," in *Ifigenia* [spectacle program] (Warszawa: Teatr Narodowy, 2008), 32.

⁵⁰ *Plastelina* (Plasticine) by Sigariew, dir. Grzegorz Wiśniewski, scenography Magdalena Gajewska, choreography Tomasz Dajewski, music Rafał Kowalczyk, prem. September 30, 2005, Teatr Polski im. Hieronima Konieczki, Bydgoszcz.

⁵¹ *Zmierzc bogów* (*The Damned*) by Badalucco, Mediolini, and Visconti, dir. Grzegorz Wiśniewski, scenography Barbara Hanicka, music Wojciech Blecharz, prem. August 29, 2009, Teatr Wybrzeże, Gdańsk.

⁵² *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Albee, dir. Grzegorz Wiśniewski, scenography Barbara Hanicka, music Rafał Kowalczyk, prem. October 2, 2015, Teatr Wybrzeże, Gdańsk.

Laboratory of Crisis

In Euripides's Ur-text, Phaedra is an abject who is imprisoned, or rather imprisons herself, in language in order to be able to maintain her ethical subjectivity. In Racine's classicist version, language also becomes a cage of desire, understood, in Phaedra's case, as a manifestation of her abjectness. The heroine's non-normative erotic love places her beyond subjectivity and objectivity.⁵³ The phenomenon of Phaedra lies in the fact that, entangled in carnal desire, she ceases to be a subject for herself, and knows that she cannot and should not be objectified through someone else's gaze. Her body becomes alien to herself, causing her only revulsion, which she also notices in Hippolytus's stare. The body, as a subject and as an object, ceases to exist for her, turning into abject. In the Greek drama, the incestuous nature of her desires deepen the tragedy of the developed situation, but also make it an ethically transparent position. Phaedra, suffering from a sense of the abjectness of her body and its desires, found refuge in language that attempts to organize her suffering through the use of dialectical syllogisms. In this way, Euripides bestowed Phaedra with an ethical subjectivity, which Racine later pursued. Thus, Phaedra's suicide is not the result of her desires remaining unfulfilled, but simply because she feels them. It is hard to imagine a more painful experience than self-loathing, which is so powerful that it evokes in her an acute sense of shame before herself and the world. The attempt to escape into a discursive order ends in failure, because no discursive formation can structure abjectness.

By staging such a defined tragic situation, Kleczewska and Zadara depart from the language of its former representation. In Kleczewska's production, Phaedra's chaotic abjectness is played out "carnally," in the convention of wet theater, as it were, outside the verbal medium of drama. In Zadara's play, Phaedra's abjectness is sarcastically mocked for hiding behind the mask of an artificial language, falsifying its essence. Meanwhile, Wiśniewski's production returns to the structure of the classicist language, representing Phaedra's tragedy, which seeks relevant counterparts on stage. Kleczewska dissects Phaedra's love discourse *in crudo*, through a corporeality stripped/released from language, allowing the actors to make a frenzied performative representation of the suffering of the

⁵³ "The importance we attach to the body and the contradictions of love are, therefore, related to a more general drama which arises from the metaphysical structure of my body, which is both an object for others and a subject for myself," Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2005), 194.

abject. *Zadara* focuses on the linguistic form of the representation of the abject, and deconstructs it *ad absurdum*, allowing the actors to flirt with the language of suffering. Wiśniewski returns to the love discourse of *Phaedra in sublime*, leading it towards a meditative formation, through silencing and rigidifying the actors' bodies, beyond pathos and exaltation.

Theater is a medium of suffering, structured into enunciatory situations by means of the machinery of the human body. It can show wailing from despair (Kleczewska), it can sarcastically negate the form of its representation (*Zadara*), or finally, it can show a degree of despair, where suffering can only be expressed through silence, a silence which does not signify relief, but which represents numbness,⁵⁴ when only an emotional stupor allows for a confrontation with suffering (Wiśniewski). And each of these forms represents the verity of theater, for each is a way of dealing with the crisis of abjectness. Ancient myths, which include the myth of *Phaedra*, had an apotropaic function; expressly, they tamed the monstrous world, creating a kind of narrative-amulet, which would neutralize evil. Theater, as a laboratory of crisis,⁵⁵ continues in this function, revealing the essence of the monstrousness (abjectness) of the world in a (post)dramatic form.

Translated by Maciej Mahler



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⁵⁴ Cf. words of Seneca's *Phaedra*: "Slight griefs talk, great ones are speechless" (*Curae leves loquuntur, ingentes stupent*), Seneca, *Phaedra*, v. 607.

⁵⁵ Cf. Heiner Müller's remark: "Theatre is crisis. It is the definition of crisis—or should be. It can only function as crisis and in a crisis, or it has no relation whatsoever to the society outside the theater walls," Carl Weber, "From Determination to Detachment: Heiner Müller's Assessment of Culture and Politics in a Lifetime of Profound Historical Change," in *The Cultural Politics of Heiner Müller*, ed. Dan Friedman (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 21.

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