



**Parkyn, L. 2010. 'The Persians by Aeschylus. Kings College London Greek Play.' *Rosetta* 8: 136-137.**

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## ***The Persians* by Aeschylus**

**Kings College London Greek Play. The Greenwood Theatre, 10<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> February 2010**

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*The Persians* is a Greek tragedy that is not performed often and it is easy to see why: nothing happens. The plot revolves around the Persian court waiting for the return of their leader, Xerxes, from the Battle of Salamis/Plataea and mourning the loss of their men. It is easy to see that it was a piece of propaganda for the Athenians, boosting their morale and showcasing their superiority, through watching the dramatised trauma and pain of the Persian people. So why perform this production that suffers from a severe lack of action today?

In recent years, the play has seen a renewed interest by contemporary directors, especially post 9/11. The production lends well to political theatre, with many adaptations of *The Persians* featuring Iraq war references and outlining arguments against the Bush administration. Despite the potential for modernisation, Kings College London avoided this by producing a version that seemed void of any specific influence.

The main drawing point of this production was the usage of the original ancient language. All cast members delivered their lines in ancient Greek and they should be highly commended for learning an alien language. However it was clear that all of the ensemble struggled with pronunciation and lacked conviction in their delivery.

The chorus is central to *The Persians*, providing the majority of the dialogue and holding a constant presence on stage. The director opted for eight chorus members. They wore an assortment of colourful, vaguely eastern themed outfits and gold half masks which seemed to individualise the members rather than unite them, which I felt let down the idea of community that the chorus exemplified. They were constantly moving around the stage, supposedly enacting the descriptions provided in the dialogue. The chorus lacked confidence in performance and the division of their lines amongst the group only helped to highlight this.

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The more competent linguists in the cast were clearly given the individual characters, with fair performances from the two actors who shared the messenger speech and the young man who played Xerxes, but it was the ghost of King Darius who stole the show. Petros Bouras-Vallianatos came across as the most comfortable of the whole ensemble with the ancient language and portrayed the monarch with the right amount of regality. Unfortunately, his performance showed the flaws in others; in particular, the presence and delivery of a very shaky Queen Atossa, who spent most of the production with her eyes cast downwards and held no authority in tonality of voice or stature.

Overall, I was unsure of where the director wanted our attention. The surtitles often flicked too quickly for the audience to read and made it clear when someone cut lines. One struggled to understand how the erratic movements and language correlated and what exactly was going on. Oriental style music would often be played over speeches, making it difficult to hear the actors and detracting from the significance of their words. The production would have been much improved if the director had chosen to focus on either language or action, or alternatively had put the stronger linguists into the chorus to help strengthen the group.

Despite its flaws, the production is commendable for a number of reasons. The actors were Classical Studies students and not professional actors; ancient Greek is not their native tongue but they spent 90 minutes talking in the language and finally, they have kept the tradition alive of performing these classical texts in their original language.