

## Prospectus for The Persians by Aeschylus

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### WHY? AIMS

Since time immemorial, music has been a universal medium of communication, appealing to the very core of our being, often without the aid of words. And the theatre in its early stages of development embraced music in the performances at old folk religious rites and festivals.

Yet, these two key elements in performing arts seem to have grown apart. Today we see a clear division between the theatre of the spoken word and the theatre of music, i.e., opera, seemingly unable to combine the two assets in an integrated performance.<sup>1</sup>

By definition, the opera performance today is entirely musical. Even in the performance of an opera based on the works of Shakespeare or Euripides, hardly any words are spoken in the performance. The passion of the drama is embodied solely in the music, not in the spoken words.

Conversely, in today's theatre of the spoken word, music rarely plays an integral part, often being relegated to the supplementary role of a sound effect. This trend becomes all the more visible when producing a classical Greek play, supposedly a dynamic composite of words, music and movement. The modern approach has been to play down the musical potential of the Chorus in the drama, or eliminate it altogether replacing the collective 12-15 Chorus with a single or a few commentators on the scene. In the rare performances where the Chorus did actually sing, a melodic rendition of contemporary music sat uncomfortably with the archaic context of the drama and the aesthetics of the production such as the use of masks and the costumes.<sup>2</sup>

Why this division? Some historical reasons. The emergence of great composers and dramatists in 16th-17th century Europe certainly consolidated the independence of each genre. Furthermore, with the advent of Naturalism at the

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<sup>1</sup> Here I refer mainly to mainstream opera, not singspiele or musicals. Mozart's singspiel *The Magic Flute*, for example, combines singing and dialogue in performance but as separate entities. Brecht/Weil's *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny* also mixes some spoken words with singing. Here the transition between the two entities is better integrated in dramatic terms, but not enough in my view.

<sup>2</sup> For example, Peter Hall's 1981 production of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* at the National Theatre, UK.

turn of the 20th century, this division deepened with the theatre becoming predominantly prose-orientated, addressing the social and political issues of the day. Thus, with a few exceptions (Yeats, Fry, Eliot, Brecht, Beckett), 'poetry', in its broadest sense, seems to have gone out of the theatre in our time. And without poetry, how could the theatre embrace music ?

## THE PLAY

Written in 472BC, shortly after the Battle of Salamis, in which Aeschylus himself is said to have taken part, the play recounts the catastrophic defeat of the Persians in that battle and comments on the hubris of men who wage war. The intensely passionate drama, performed by five nature speaking characters and a Chorus of 12-15 men, would suit an operatic interpretation, and has great musical and theatrical potential. The work will require a robust collaboration between the poet/writer, composer and director, and exploratory workshops.

From 2003 to 2007, during the early stage of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, no less than four US theatre companies<sup>3</sup> performed *The Persians* in three US cities, New York, Washington DC and San Francisco. But tellingly, all four companies chose to perform Ellen McLaughlin's adapted version of the play. A highly acclaimed work, but her adaptation radically reduced the collective 15 man Chorus in Aeschylus' original to seven individual speaking parts, with little hint or thought for possible musical input, missing what could have been the most powerful component of the performance.

So how did it work ? How was the performance received ?

Reviewing the New York premiere performed by the National Actors Theatre at the Shimmell Centre, New York, in 2003 (25 June-3 July), Michael Feingold, theatre critic for the Village Voice, pointedly summed up: "The Oldest Surviving Play Speaks, But Can It Still Sing ?" The answer is: Yes it can.

## THE TEXT

We aim to present the drama in its original form, without refashioning it in a modern context or altering the role of the Chorus. The play can speak for itself. Some twenty-five centuries on, the play still resonates today, but it would resonate all the more powerfully if presented in its original form and context, as this would underline the timeless themes of war and the folly of arrogant men who wage war believing that the gods are on their side.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The National Actors Company, The Pearl Theatre, The Shakespeare Theatre Company and the Aurora theatre based in Berkeley, California

<sup>4</sup> Bob Dylan's song 'With God On Our Side' addressed a similar theme and sentiment in the 1960s, at the time of the war in Vietnam. The Persians believed that too. And some war leaders still do.

Still, the text requires some degree of editing and clarification, and a text in verse will need to be prepared for the performance. Craig Raine expressed his interest when this project was first launched.<sup>5</sup>

An outline of the play with excerpts from Philip Vellacott's translation:  
[www.ahorie.net/Persians\\_Outline.pdf](http://www.ahorie.net/Persians_Outline.pdf)

## THE MUSIC

Overview: The play is an impassioned account of the war, the battles and the catastrophic loss of life. Thus the music is to be direct, not overtly decorative or melodic but powerful. The text is to be part spoken, part sung or chanted unaccompanied, except for ethnic percussion and pipes, sparsely woven into the text and the action. A lyre-like string instrument, with flute, could heighten the drama and emotions at a few selected moments.

Apart from actor/singers for the Chorus, the project will enlist the expertise of three exceptional musicians, with whom I worked in my *Daniel* production:

Andrew Lawrence-King: Composer and Musical Director

Michael Metzler: Ethnic Percussion and Bells

Ian Harrison: Medieval Winds and Vielle

Andrew is an acclaimed producer and conductor of early music. His contribution to the extensive choral work of the Chorus will be invaluable. There are no historical sources from which we may imagine what the music was like in those ancient days, except for some archaeological evidence on instruments. Andrew's expertise and talent in producing richly choral music from the simple notations of early scores will serve well for this project, which requires a bold imagination to go further back in time. Also a performer on medieval harp, psaltery, synfonie and a number of other early instruments, he will create the unique musical landscape of the performance.

Andrew: [www.allmusic.com/artist/andrew-lawrence-king-mn0000008954](http://www.allmusic.com/artist/andrew-lawrence-king-mn0000008954)

Michael: [www.lindensaalkonzerte.de/pages/michael-metzler.php](http://www.lindensaalkonzerte.de/pages/michael-metzler.php)

Ian: [www.ian-harrison.de/](http://www.ian-harrison.de/)

Also see Profiles: [http://www.ahorie.net/On\\_Daniel.htm](http://www.ahorie.net/On_Daniel.htm)

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<sup>5</sup> This project was first launched in 2007. The RSC was among the first to take an interest in the project and Craig Raine agreed to produce a text in verse for the performance. Andrew Lawrence-King was also enlisted as the Composer/Musical Director. However, the RSC had to withdraw their support eventually, and with that, due to insufficient funding, the project was suspended,