

***Prometheus Bound* in Christchurch 2009**

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The *Prometheus Bound* has traditionally been attributed to Aeschylus, but in recent decades his authorship has been seriously questioned. Irrespective of this issue, the play has an important place in the surviving corpus of Greek tragedy, dealing with timeless issues such as tyranny and freedom, law, rebellion, and justice and injustice, as well as exploring the questions of suffering and fate, the evolution of humanity, and the relationship between the human and divine worlds. It's not often performed on the modern stage, partly because action is limited, given that the main character is chained to a rock at the outset, after which he converses with a number of characters who come to visit him for a variety of reasons.

The challenge to stage this play and to make it work in the theatre for a modern audience was taken up recently by Robin Bond – I attended the opening night of his production on Wednesday 9 December 2009 at the Old Queen's Theatre in Christchurch, New Zealand. Over the years Bond has successfully directed a large number of ancient tragedies and comedies. The questions I was asking myself, though, as I waited for the lights to go down, were firstly what approach he would take to this especially problematic play, and secondly whether it would be effective.

What options were available to him? Well, he could have done a so-called 'update' on the play, reworking or 'reinventing' it so as to adapt it to a recognizable modern context. This is a familiar procedure, especially from the 20th century,

though by no means confined to that. Plays such as Jean Anouilh's version of *Antigone* have become classics in their own right. In the case of the *Prometheus Bound*, there's a good New Zealand precedent in the form of James K. Baxter's play *The Bureaucrat* in which the Prometheus figure, Mr Fireman, is a civil servant chained, as it were, to his desk and, as his name suggests, effectively putting out fires of creativity rather than facilitating them. Baxter's comparative lack of success with this, one of four plays loosely based on Greek tragedies, one other of which is given a modern setting, illustrates the difficulty which this approach involves. And Bond, of course, isn't a poet or playwright anyway.

Another option would have been to use an existing translation of the play, whether this was reasonably close to the original Greek or, on the other hand, more freely translated, either keeping the Greek setting or setting the action in some other period or context. In fact, Bond did what he's done with his previous productions – he used his own translation of the play. There are considerable advantages in this approach. For a start, there's no problem with copyright or performance permission issues. Then too Bond knows his Greek, he has considerable experience of the theatre, and he's honed his translation skills to produce actable playscripts. In this case, he's come up with a version which is basically faithful to the original but which is couched in language which sounds eminently appropriate. The original setting has been retained, so it's really a case of letting the text speak for itself without enhancements or gimmicks.

The original language of Greek tragedy is, of course, highly formal, and it's very hard to convey this impression in English without making the translation

stilted. Such a translation too really necessitates the use of more formalized or ritualistic acting à la Peter Brook, for example, which has on occasion proved successful but which has the effect of distancing the action from the audience. Going to the opposite extreme, some translators and/or directors resort to colloquial language. This may resonate with an audience, but it fails to convey anything of the spirit of the Greek, and also tends to locate the action in a constrained contemporary milieu which negates the universal and timeless nature of the ideas and images being expressed. Bond's version strikes a nice balance. It never descends to the banality of colloquialism on the one hand, nor does it come across as pompous and unnatural so as to alienate modern ears.

To recap, Bond was faced with the task of making the action of a play based on a mythological story and originally written for an ancient Athenian audience come alive for a modern New Zealand spectator. Old ideas had to be able to be reinterpreted and morph into new ideas. Bond's strategy in this situation was to blend 'realism' with 'symbolism'. The main feature of what was in fact a comparatively simple set was a tall two-part wooden structure with a series of steps at the base leading from a sloping, circular platform slightly raised above ground level. The wooden structure represented the rocky cliff to which Prometheus was chained by the god Hephaistos in the opening scene. The point being made was that, although the audience was asked to imagine that the place of chaining was a cliff face, an individual or indeed a community could be chained in any number of contexts. The fact that the wooden structure could not be specifically identified

opened up a wealth of possibilities which wouldn't have been available if the identity of the structure had been particularized.

In the ancient Greek theatre, all the actors and chorus members wore masks. This practice was followed in Bond's production, with a single important exception. This was the central and dominating character, Prometheus himself. The strategy served to confirm Prometheus' centrality, but it had other important results as well. It meant that every aspect of his suffering was plainly visible, but it also pointed up a telling contrast between an individual to whom the audience could directly relate and the more shadowy, masked figures hovering around him like satellites or in some sense inhabitants of a different sphere. It was a bold and innovative move, given that most productions either feature full masking or no masking.

An important part of every Greek tragedy is the chorus, but it's the chorus which is so often a stumbling block for modern directors who are working in a space which is quite different from that of the ancient Greek theatre and which doesn't accommodate a full complement of twelve or fifteen choreutae, even if financial considerations would allow this. Moreover, what passes for a chorus often obtrudes for a modern audience as an artificial and alien distraction. In Bond's production, however, the chorus was handled sensitively and effectively. In the action of the play they are the daughters of Okeanos and they arrive by some means of winged transport.

The mind boggles at what Bond might have attempted – unwisely – and it boggles again at some of the impossibly impracticable suggestions that have been made by modern scholars as to how this might have been handled in the theatre of

Dionysus. Bond used six female actors who, wearing expressive masks, crept in individually to the accompaniment of whirring sounds from the background. Their dress was unobtrusive (grey top and black tights), and so they fitted nicely into the environment. An innovation was to have the chorus leader as an older woman, dressed all in grey with a stick, one of two older women who were usually placed at the outsides of the group, framing the younger members. The stylized choral movements on and around the set and in relation to Prometheus were finely orchestrated, the division of speaking parts judicious and, unlike the chorus of so many modern performances of Greek tragedies, they were felt to be an integral part of the action. Particularly effective was the way in which they crouched motionless close together staring at Hermes which provided just the right basis for their rejection of his offer to them to abandon Prometheus to his fate. Bond has clearly done much research on the Greek chorus, from the texts themselves, from what is known about their disposition and movement in the ancient theatre, and from how they have been used in modern productions.

Crucial to the success of any production of this play, of course, is the Prometheus figure himself. It must be tempting for a modern director to make an overt 'reference' through him to the victims of some modern régime or, on the other hand, to evoke the Christ figure. Bond didn't do that. He was more subtle. His Prometheus wore tattered white clothing, which might be taken as faintly hinting at Christ, but which could also evoke a range of other victim types and situations of victimization. Thus an effective universality was achieved. His binding at the start of the play was most effective. Total realism for this is, of course, clearly out of the

question, since a metal spike is supposed to be hammered through his chest. There was therefore an element of miming but, most importantly, the chains were real, so that a tangible atmosphere of torture and enslavement was created. The reluctant agent of the binding, the god Hephaistos (urged on by the heartless personified abstractions 'Might' and 'Strength'), was made to limp noticeably. This is good mythology, of course, but it also nicely evoked the maimed nature of acts of cruelty, and also the very vulnerability of those compelled to carry out such acts.

There was one character in the play through whom a more direct reference to the contemporary world seemed to be being made. This was Okeanos, Prometheus' first visitor after the chorus. Okeanos is represented in the text as flying in on a griffin, not exactly a recognizable mode of transport for a modern audience, and not easy to reproduce with any degree of 'realism' in a theatre with strictly limited technical resources. Bond staged it cleverly, having four chorus members 'escort' him swiftly on to the acting area. Okeanos is something of a coward and compromiser, who is clearly frightened of the authority and power of the unseen Zeus, and is quick to go home again when reminded of this by Prometheus. Bond had Okeanos wearing a black academic gown to go with his mask. Nothing was specifically made of this, but it surely implied the typical academic offering token support to a rebel but feeling too intimidated to stand up in any significant way against the authority of the University 'powers that be' in the current corporatized University context. The point was not overdone, and was the more thought-provoking for it.

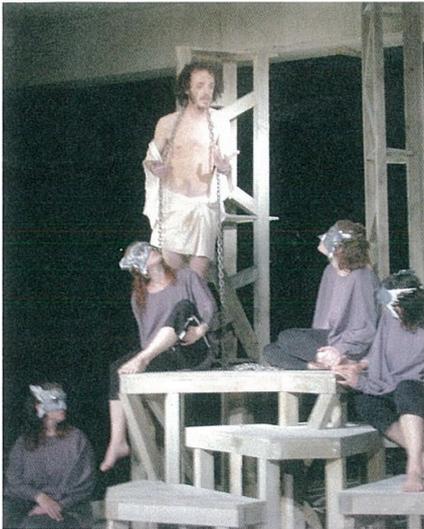
The Io character was also sensitively handled. Io is an innocent female who suffers as a result of Zeus' lust for her. The dress with which Bond had provided her strongly implied a wedding dress, which in turn implied the theme of sexual victimization. She fitted perfectly into the 'story' particularized in the script (she 's been transformed into a cow, and her mask indicated this metamorphosis), but at the same time she was easily representative of any female in any context who suffers from the libido of a male authority figure. The 'wedding dress' too appeared to be embedded in much contemporary classical scholarship about 'the perverted wedding'.

Prometheus' final visitor is the messenger god Hermes who tries to force Prometheus to reveal a secret which has the potential to dethrone Zeus himself. This was a most effective climax to the play as Hermes, dressed in brown leather jacket, white shirt and jeans to go with his wand, acted the part of the lackey bully-boy to good effect. He was an arrogant grease ball who could be seen as any type of young thug, circling round an incapacitated older victim.

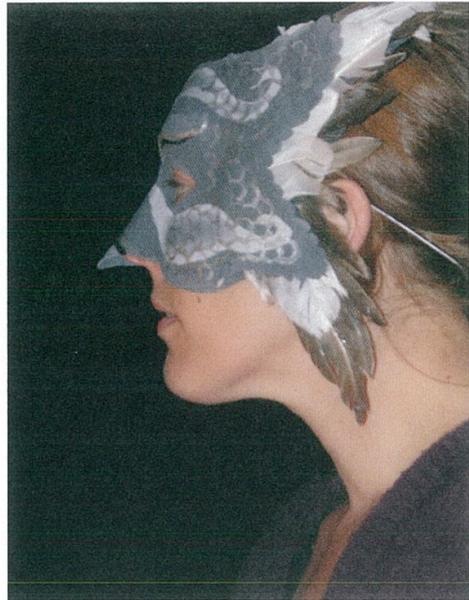
When Prometheus refuses to divulge his secret, despite the threat of further torment, he's sent crashing to the Underworld. The cataclysm was staged most effectively through lighting and off-stage sound effects, as the chorus folded up around Prometheus. The music and sound effects throughout the performance, indeed, were highly effective, not overdone, but stunningly evocative, ranging from the wind of a bleak wilderness and the whirring of wings, through the buzz of the stinging gadfly and Zeus' thunder.

In conclusion, it could be said, in a sense, that this was a production that had been waiting to happen, a production which contributed significantly to the developing portfolio of modern productions of ancient plays. Moreover, it had special value, given the comparative rarity of productions of this particular play. And Bond's directorial decisions made a major contribution to the ongoing debate about how ancient plays can and should be staged in modern contexts and about the very relevance of such ancient texts to modern society.

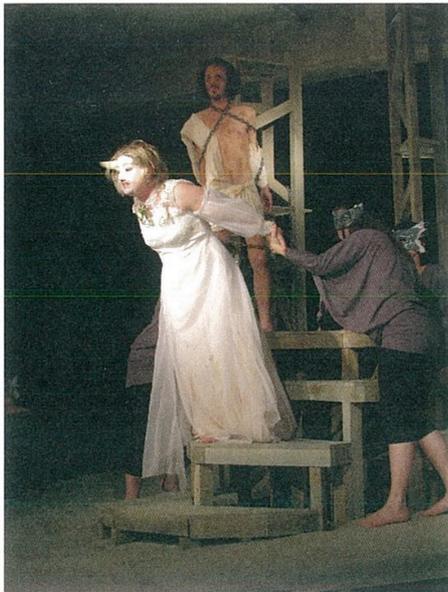
Every member of the audience would have learnt much from the production, and the cast as well as those involved in the making of the set, masks and costumes, those working the lighting, the music and the sound effects, and those developing the choreography, would have benefited greatly through the development of their skills and understanding of theatre practice. Finally, this production was not simply 'run-of-the-mill'. It was innovative in its concept and in its realization and made an important contribution to the cultural life of Christchurch.



Prometheus and Okeanids



Okeanid



Io in despair