

2017 Festival: Tiresias

Oracular Voice - Blind Seer - Transsexual

Myth and Theatre Festival

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From an engraving by Giambattista Tiepolo from *Scherzi di Fantasia*, circa 1745.

Tiresias is a disquieting character, perhaps the greatest diviner in Antiquity, feared for his prophecies of doom and ill omen, and so, considered a jinxed harbinger of bad luck, a killjoy. But the fact is he is a figure of truth: resistances to his voice are rooted in a panic fear of his clairvoyance¹. Moreover, in the depths of our intuitive memories, we know his insights are somehow related to his shamanic metamorphoses² – to transsexuality.

Tiresias is best known for the revelations he made to Oedipus who wanted nothing to do with him nor with consulting diviners: his was panic under the guise of rationality,



Oedipus menacing Tiresias, who clearly sulks. The drawing is very similar, even identical to some said to be describing Ulysses menacing Tiresias during his descent into the Underworld.

especially given Tiresias' long record with the Thebes royal family. One could say public opinion forced him to call on Tiresias – and Oedipus then had to coerce him to speak. Tiresias clearly sensed what was going on. And, sure enough, the result was atrocious: at the vision of his hanging mother-wife, Oedipus pierced his eyes with the brooch that held her dress together. This disastrous story uncovers a terrible lack of clairvoyance, and blind Tiresias turns out to be the only one who could see through.

Oedipus actually thought he was behaving as a rational and correct politician: he saw nothing coming. In terms of our current research, Oedipus could not hear and figure out the music, *the voice of the music*. He could not decrypt the back-up

¹ I see **clairvoyance** as one of the most ambitious aims of the performer as creator, as medium-interpreter especially of texts – therefore as diviner too. It is the capacity to deal with (no panic, no truth) and foster meaning, including with textual proposals, and from inside the image (when onstage the performer is “in image”). In the training I speak of cultivating “the instinct of image” – akin to becoming an animal of imagination.

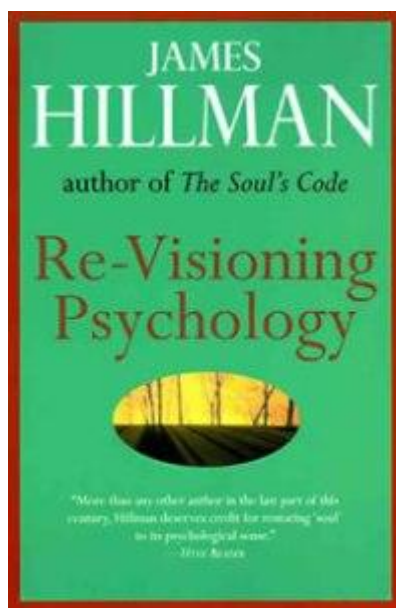
² I would venture to say that this is the main thesis of Peter Kingsley's books (to be read absolutely): the shamanic origins of, among others, pre-Socratic metaphysics.

vocalists³. *Rojo*, the trickster-hero character in *The Iceberg Princess*, does so, and fabulously: he hears and deciphers *The Three Crows*⁴.

Nor had Oedipus been able to see, in his panic-stricken flight from the verdict of the Delphic oracle, who was the elderly gentleman disputing the priority on the road: he massacred him and his servants. It was Laius, the king of Thebes, his own father. He killed his father because he did not want to give way, he did not want to YIELD! This is the number one rule in our text work: the hero / herald gives way, goes into sub-mission mode.



Julian Beck – the founder, with Judith Melina, of the Living Theatre played Tiresias in Pasolini's film *Oedipus Rex*, 1967.



Euripides could be described as a playwright-seer given the way he rewrites myths: he makes them acutely, sometimes unbearably relevant to his contemporaries. In *The Bacchae*, he denounces the blind politicians of Athens. His message was delivered posthumously since he died in exile because of his critical and outspoken clairvoyance. Tiresias, in this tragedy, plays a similar role to Oedipus; the victim is Pentheus, another king of Thebes, and also, like Oedipus, a standing-tall straight ruler. One difference however: Pentheus had a voyeur side and wanted to see with his own eyes what was going on in the bacchanal orgies. To this end he agreed to transvestite himself, with Tiresias, and to follow him to Mount Cithaeron. Agave, his mother, become the most ferocious of the bacchae, decapitated him with bare hands.

If we are to speak in terms of a mantic theater, all this is indispensable: we must study the fundamental mechanisms of these terrible dead-ends in order to enrich and deepen the narrative processes of a choreographic theater, and to better understand *The Voices of the Chorus*. Freud did it, even though Lacan expressed regret that he had not concentrated rather on Tiresias: instead of the Oedipus complex we would have the complexities of Tiresias! James Hillman has done so too, and at many levels: he describes his archetypal thinking as *seeing through*: a form of clairvoyance, of divination⁵.

³ Background Vocalists : see the article *La Voix du Chœur* (English translation soon) – and eventually the video of the seminar (on request) on Background Vocalists, also known as back-up singers: the choristers. The implication being that these voices have a mantic status. They know better.

⁴ An allusion to the character of *Rojo* in *The Iceberg Princess*, an exceptional Gypsy tale, and an equally exceptional analysis by Anna Griève – notably on the deciphering of the language of the birds (“a sleight of hand called *augur*”), in her book, *The Three Crows – Towards a Science of Evil in Fairy Tales*. [See presentation](#).

⁵ One of James Hillman's greatest books is entitled *Re-visioning Psychology* (1975); both a revision and a new vision of psychology. In performance it is not only a question of having a vision, but of making the physical cross-over into an embodied performance. *To see something through* is to go all the way, to act out: metamorphosis and, again, performance.

So far the backdrop, the *background voices* of the narratives concerning Tiresias seem rather gore: haunted and bloody. Greek tragedy did its cathartic work at this level – and, in my opinion, far more deeply than Aristotle gives it credit. We have to catch up, exploring **post-tragic** thought and theater. My own first « post-tragic » fantasy was to interview Hecuba, thirty years after the fall of Troy. At present I opt for forty years or more: thirty years is short to bring such matters up with a queen, a woman who went through what she went through. But it is with such answers that I would like to do theater – knowing full well that the wounded memories are likely to resurface and cause explosions of violence and the return of the bloody ghosts of tragedy, and that I myself could take a blast for asking such questions.

For the record: Hecuba was the queen of Troy. After the end of the war and the defeat of the Trojans, she saw her family decimated and her daughters become slaves of the victorious Achaeans. Versions vary about her own fortune, but it seems that she became the concubine slave of Ulysses / Odysseus – this calls for several exclamation marks!!!! On one of her first journeys with Ulysses, she learned that King Polymestor, to whom she had entrusted her son Polydore, had killed the child to take possession of the inheritance. She tears out his eyes (once again!) and massacres his two children. And metamorphoses into a rabid bitch. Ulysses tried to restrain her. Question: did he plan to adopt the child on this first trip? Did he do so afterwards? Another question: Hecuba did not commit suicide at the end of the war, as her rank and honor could have predicted. Why not? And the most human and difficult question to ask: « Madame, did you share his bed? »



Tiresias, here a woman, with a stick facing a couple of snakes copulating. Snakes and rods form possibly the most important emblems of magic.

Again, all this seems rather gore and perhaps, for some, indiscreet or even pornographic. On this last point, yes: adult intimacy and the theater of sexuality interest me seriously. Moreover, my work is not particularly gore, but it wishes to address the share of violence in human behavior and the importance of expressing it, giving it form, voice and performance, and therefore giving it psychological and political commentary. That was also (perhaps most importantly) the voice according to Roy Hart. Giulia Sissa defends the aristocracy of ire in her book on *Jealousy*⁶. James Hillman speaks of *imagines agentes* in Neoplatonism and in the *Art of Memory*: the expressive images, expressionistic even, that impact and

impress the spirit of memory and of soul-making.

It is with these ideas in mind that I would like to interview Tiresias, with all those who wish to join us.

⁶ *La Jalousie / Une Passion Inavouable*, Giulia Sissa, Ed. Odile Jacob, Paris. This was for me THE 2016 book of the year – about to be translated in the USA (March 2017).

REASONS and ANTECEDENTS

The reasons and antecedents for the choice of Tiresias fall into three main points:



A rather Moses-like Tiresias. Moses, born in Egypt, educated in the highest pharaonic circles is in many ways the founder of Jewish magic, and certainly a mantic figure.

Oracular Voice. The importance of oracular models, and mantics in general. If « the voice is always a dream »: how to interpret it? How does choreographic theater and a theater of images 'speak' to us? What is its voice in terms of narration and dramaturgy? What is a mytho-poetic theater?

Blind Seer. To be on stage is to be inside the image, inside the dream, and therefore somehow to be a « blind seer ». Performance work is to cultivate the instinct of image, to understand one's place in the image and to take position. This means to develop the poetic animal, the visionary performer.

Transsexual. The last conversations during the 2016 festival on *Eros and Psyche* often turned to

gender issues and to the theatre of sexuality. Tiresias changed sex more than once in his/her long life (the myth speaks of three hundred years!) He/she must be consulted!

Here are some of the exchanges that led to this choice:

Comments by Anna Griève in the final days of the 2016 festival, dedicated to *Eros and Psyche*, on the mysteries of the phallus – a notion that she clearly differentiates from that of penis. For Anna Griève the phallus is an autonomous figure, a concept, not attached to a specific man, unlike the penis – not even to a male body. We viewed ancient Greek images and, especially, Roman ones of winged phallus, and commented on their apotropaic use (protective talismanic objects), like *tintamarres* (jingle bells guarding the entrance of houses), or priapic figurines (Priapus being the phallic god par excellence), worn by women on their collars. Picasso – him again! – used the motif in a series of extraordinary prints late in his life, called *Phallophoria*. [See DIAPORAMA](#)

Exchanges with Paola Daniele, invited Italian artist, who organized a ritual-performance and gave a lecture together with Soraia Sánchez on Paul B. Preciado, Spanish philosopher whose main militant research theme is the cultural foundations of gender and sexuality. For several years she has self-administered daily doses of testosterone and changed her name from Beatriz to Paul B. At the end of the festival, Paola Daniele made a proposal which I paraphrase: « We have talked a lot about Eros and the phallus-spirit: we should now turn to the female sex who has some extraordinary things to tell us ... » Two references on this: the immense popularity in recent years of *The Vagina Monologues*. And now the revelations (coming so late in contemporary history!) on the physiology of the clitoris and its role in female sexuality.

Following the festival, I gave a series of seminars in Malérargues, continuing the series titled *Shamanism and Algorithms*, on four discussion themes:

Arrows and Parcours Fléchés (signposted, i.e. ‘arrowed’ trails): the arrows of Eros, of course, but also the shamanic arrows of Mongolia and the importance that Peter Kingsley gives them in his theories on the origins of metaphysics – especially in Pythagoras. [See DIAPORAMA](#)

PSYCHOSOMATICS 1: Broken Heart and Cancer – comments on the proposals of Ginette Paris, Roy Hart and Victoria Santa Cruz on these topics – with the presentation of the video of possibly the most impressive vocal performance that I have seen: *Dancing my Cancer*, by Anna Halprin. [See DIAPORAMA](#)

PSYCHOSOMATICS 2: We developed three themes:

A speculative proposal by Kaya Anderson on cancer and psychosomatics.

The most recent scandal by Alejandro Jodorowsky around psychomagic and theater. [See POST](#)

Roy Hart: psychosomatics and singing.

Oracular voices: « Silence those female voices! » The closing of the oracles with the advent of Christianity. Towards a cultural history of the voice. [See DIAPORAMA](#)

These are some the ideas that led to the choice of the figure of Tiresias.

Enrique Pardo, El Cotillo, September 9, 2016

The main myths about Tiresias (to be developed) are:

- The voyeur-seer: the copulation of snakes and the sex changes.
- The wrath of Hera at the revelation of the superiority of female sexual pleasure.
- Odysseus consults Tiresias in the Underworld. Quote from [Shmoop](#) – *We speak student*. Surprising! Includes quotes from the Beatles (*Blackbird*) and Bob Marley (*Three Little Birds*):
“You might easily mistake him (Tiresias) for a crazy dude spouting gibberish on the corner, but Tiresias was totally legit. This old, blind man was a priest of Apollo and one of the most famous seers of all time. He could hear the future in the songs of birds (a little trick called augury), and he also received visions sent to him by the gods. Tiresias used his powers to advise seven generations of kings in his hometown of Thebes, though they had a tendency not to listen to what he had to say until it was too late. (We’re looking at you, Oedipus and Creon.) Even after Tiresias died by drinking from the poisoned water of Tilphussa, he had tons of power. Odysseus himself made a pit stop in the Underworld to get some travel advice from Tiresias, without which the O-man never would’ve made it home. Tiresias may have been a rough looking dude with a tendency to speak in cryptic riddles, but in the end, he was totally worth listening to.”