



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4312/keria.20.3.75-94>

Bernd Seidensticker

# Ancient Drama and Reception of Antiquity in the Theatre and Drama of the German Democratic Republic (GDR)

Theatre played an important role in the cultural policy of the German Democratic Republic. Probably nowhere in the world were there more state-subsidised theatres in relation to the size of the country and its population. The numerous theatres were heavily subsidised so that everybody could afford the low entrance fees, and, at the same time, they were closely supervised. To be sure, there were brief more liberal periods between 1953 (death of Stalin) and 1956 (the Hungarian uprising) and after 1971 (the replacement of the general secretary of the communist party Walter Ulbricht by Erich Honecker) and there were regional differences in the strictness of the controls. However, in general the close-knit network of supervision by two complementary institutions – state and party – which sometimes worked together and sometimes against each other – functioned perfectly. On the one side was the Ministry of Culture with its special advisory committee for the dramatic arts, which decided about all world premieres and GDR premieres of plays, but mostly acted through state officials at the district or local level. On the other side was the omnipresent party, perfectly organized in its tight hierarchical structure from the groups of party members within the theatres<sup>1</sup> up to Politburo and Central Committee.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, behind the scenes, there was a third player: the Ministry of State Security (MFS) or “Stasi”.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 In the larger theatres there were several different party subgroups organized on an occupational basis: administrators, technicians, actors etc.
- 2 Christa Hasche, Traute Schölling und Joachim Fiebach, *Theater in der DDR: Chronik und Positionen*; Mit einem Essay von Ralph Hammerthaler (Berlin: Henschel, 1994), 187–93; in cases of doubt the party, of course, had the final say.
- 3 Cf. Hammerthaler, n.2, 187–93; 203–207; Barrie Baker, *Theatre Censorship in Honecker's Germany: From Volker Braun to Samuel Beckett*, German Linguistic and Cultural Studies 23 (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), and Laura Bradley, *Cooperation and Conflict: GDR Theatre Censorship, 1961–1989* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

All theatres had to submit their annual programs and three-to-five-year plans, in which they had to specify the plays they intended to stage and outline the aesthetic and political conceptions of their productions. Time and again they had to justify themselves for particular productions during the rehearsals. Often productions were forbidden and directors and authors were not only criticised but penalised. Artistically the performances were to conform to the doctrine of socialist realism as developed in the Soviet Union by the odd pair of fathers of social realism, Maxim Gorky and Josef Stalin; and productions that failed to meet this standard were criticised as examples for western decadence and formalism.<sup>4</sup>

Politically, authors and theatres were required to produce plays that contributed to the building of a socialist state and presented socialist ideas and heroes as positive role models for their audiences.<sup>5</sup> It is no wonder that for a fairly long time the staging of Greek and Roman tragedies and comedies played a marginal role.<sup>6</sup> Even Bertolt Brecht – after his return from exile in the US – did not begin his work in East Berlin with a production of his adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, but with his *Mother Courage*,<sup>7</sup> and the few ancient plays that were produced were exclusively anti-war plays: Aeschylus' *Persae*, Euripides' *Trojan Women*, and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*.<sup>8</sup> It fits the picture that there were almost no productions of the 'Greek' plays by Eugene O'Neill, Jean Giraudoux, Jean Anouilh, or Jean-Paul Sartre, which were so highly successful in the West.<sup>9</sup>

- 
- 4 The first example was the severe criticism of Carl Orff's *Antigonae* (Dresden 1950) as 'pure formalism' and 'cultural barbarism'; other key words of the criticism were 'scepticism' and 'pessimism'. Cf. Walter Ulbricht, "Fragen der Entwicklung der sozialistischen Kultur und Kunst" (Rede vor Schriftstellern, Brigaden der sozialistischen Arbeit und Kulturschaffenden in Bitterfeld am 24. April 1958), in *Zur sozialistischen Kulturrevolution: Dokumente 1957–59*, ed. by Marianne Lange (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1960), 455–77, 456f. Ulbricht demanded an affirmative, idealising art, which showed that problems and contradictions were resolved; cf. Hasche, Schölling und Fiebach, *Theater in der DDR*, 55–57; Günter Agde, *Kahlschlag: Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965; Studien und Dokumente* (Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), 128–47 (for Ulbricht's Philippica at the 11th plenary session of the central committee in 1965), and the documents of the formalism-debate in Helmut Kreuzer and Karl-Wilhelm Schmidt, *Dramaturgie in der DDR 1945–1990* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1998), vol. 2, 1970–1990, 41–112.
- 5 The discussion about the role and form of theatre in a future socialist state (after the victory over Nazi-Germany) had already begun in Moscow, where many communists and socialists had fled after 1933, and continued after their return to East Berlin. The goal was the constitution of a "Socialist National Theatre", which had to present German classical drama and contemporary socialist plays; cf. Petra Stuber, *Spielräume und Grenzen: Studien zum DDR Theater* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2000), 12–18; for the official function(s) of theatre in the GDR cf. Hammerthaler, n.2, 250–255.
- 6 Cf. Christoph Trilse, *Antike und Theater heute* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1979), 65–71.
- 7 11 January 1949; the 'Churer' *Antigone* was seldom performed in the GDR: first production in Greiz (1951); later Eisenach (1951/52) und Gera (1957/58), never in Ostberlin!
- 8 This is also true for new plays with a classical theme. Here we find almost exclusively plays about the home-comer Odysseus; cf. Trilse, *Antike und Theater heute*, 67f. The production of Euripides' *Ion* in Meiningen (1960) is a rare exemption; about this Trilse, *Antike und Theater heute*, 143–47, who also, 130–43, discusses the frequently staged free adaptations of classical tragedies by Matthias Braun – *Troerinnen* (first 1957); *Medea* (first 1958); *Perser* (first 1960); *Elektras Tod* (1970), 130–43.
- 9 The productions of Jean Giraudoux' *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu* 1946/47 in Cottbus, or Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* 1947/48 in Leipzig and Erfurt remained exceptions.

This general picture did not change until the sixties.<sup>10</sup> In 1962 the leading theatre of the GDR, *Das deutsche Theater* in Berlin, presented Peter Hacks' adaptation of Aristophanes' *Peace*, directed by Benno Besson, and celebrated one of the greatest successes in its successful history. In no less than twelve theatre seasons *Peace* was shown in more than 250 performances, and road tours spread the fame of the production throughout Germany, Europe, and beyond.<sup>11</sup> The play was put on stage by a large number of theatres in the GDR and inspired other dramatists to adapt Greek and Roman comedy and tragedy for the contemporary stage.

In the following years the number of theatres that took part in the boom grew, the number of performances continued to increase, and, in the eighties, there were even extensive theatre festivals with ancient plays in Stendal<sup>12</sup> and Schwerin.<sup>13</sup> There were some favourites (marked with an asterisk), more or less the usual suspects, one is tempted to say:

Aischylos: *Persians*,\* *Prometheus Bound*;\* *Seven against Thebes* (1969); *Agamemnon* (1982);  
 Sophokles: *Antigone*;\* *Oedipus Tyrannus* (1965); *Electra* 1979, 1980); *Trachiniae* (1989);  
 Euripides: *Trojan Woman*;\* *Medea*;\* *Cyclops* (1981); *Iphigeneia in Aulis* (1982)  
*Helen* (1983); *Bacchae* (1987);  
 Aristophanes: *Lysistrata*;\* *Peace*;\* *Ecclesiazusae* (1975, 1979); *Birds* (1981);  
*Acharnians* (1982); *Knights* (1985); *Ploutos* (1987).

Productions of Roman comedies, such as the *Miles Gloriosus* of Plautus,<sup>14</sup>

- 
- 10 Cf. Mara Zöllner, Berlin, "Volksbühne: Die 'Troerinnen' von Matthias Braun," in *Theater der Zeit* 16 June (1961): 63; "Die DDR-Bühnen haben es versäumt, sich die klassische Antike zu erobern."
- 11 Cf. Bernd Seidensticker, "Aristophanes is back! Peter Hacks's Adaptation of *Peace*," in *Aristophanes in Performance*, ed. by Edith Hall and Amanda Wrigley (London: Legenda, 2007), 194–208; Ulrich K. Goldsmith, "Aristophanes in East Germany: Peter Hacks' Adaptation of *Peace*," in: *Hypatia: essays in classics, comparative literature, and philosophy presented to Hazel E. Barnes on her 70. Birthday*, ed. by William M. Calder et al. (Colorado: Colorado Associated Press, 1985), 105–123; Christa Neuweg-Herwig, "Benno Bessons komödiantischer und kritischer Realismus," in *Durch den eisernen Vorhang: Theater im geteilten Deutschland 1945 bis 1990*, ed. by Henning Rischbieter (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag 1999), 105–116; Frank Stucke, *Die Aristophanes-Bearbeitungen von Peter Hacks* (Berlin: Tenea, 2002).
- 12 For the first three of the theatre festivals in Stendal cf. Volker Riedel, "Theaterfest Antike I–III," *Weimarer Beiträge* 31 (1985), 268–71.
- 13 In 1982 Christoph Schroth presented four plays (under the title "Antike-Entdeckungen"): Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Aulis* (Friedrich Schiller), Euripides, *Trojan Women* (Jean-Paul Sartre), Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* (Gerhard Kelling), and Aristophanes, *Acharnians* (Kurt Bartsch). The four anti-war plays (Schroth: 'a cycle of violence') served as a plea for peace at a time when NATO was deploying Pershing missiles in West Germany; cf. Renate Ullrich, *Schweriner Entdeckungen: Ein Theater im Gespräch* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1986), 118–28.
- 14 In a free adaptation by Joachim Knauth; cf. Trilse, *Antike und Theater heute*, 246–49; already a decade earlier Erika Wilde had used Plautus' comedy for a successful musical libretto (first production Leipzig 1957); the only other plays by Plautus that inspired adaptations were the *Amphitruo* – cf. Peter Hacks, *Amphitruo* (1967/68), Armin Stolper, *Amphitruo* (1967/68) – and the *Mercator*, cf. Egon Günther, *Das gekaufte Mädchen* (Berlin: Henschelverl., Abt. Bühnenvertrieb, 1965).

were the exception; Seneca's tragedies were not played at all. In addition to the plays of the great ancient playwrights, there were a fairly large number of modern plays based on ancient myths and history, which, however, often could not be staged.<sup>15</sup>

For Peter Hacks the adaptation of Aristophanes' *Peace* was 'the beginning of a wonderful friendship' with antiquity, attested by the long series of Greek and Roman plays that he wrote in the following three decades.<sup>16</sup> The other famous dramatist of the GDR, Hack's contemporary Heiner Müller, experimented similarly with ancient plays and subjects,<sup>17</sup> and a number of younger dramatists followed suit: Stefan Schütz,<sup>18</sup> Hartmut Lange,<sup>19</sup> Jochen Berg,<sup>20</sup> and Karl Mickel.<sup>21</sup>

From a later perspective, the 1962 production of Hacks' adaptation of Aristophanes' *Peace* appears to have been the starting-signal for the rich reception of antiquity both in the dramatic literature and on the stages of the GDR.

The astounding breadth and variety of the reception of antiquity, which besides theatre and drama included lyric poetry and prose, as well as music and the visual arts,<sup>22</sup> cannot be explained, however, by a single theatre-event.<sup>23</sup> There were other and stronger stimuli: one of the main reasons was that the

15 Cf. notes 16–21.

16 *Die schöne Helena*, nach Jacques Offenbach (1964), *Amphitryon* (1967), *Prexaspes* (1968), *Omphale* (1971), *Numa* (1971), *Vögel*, frei nach Aristophanes (1973), *Rosie träumt* (1974) – a homage to Hrotsvit von Gandersheim, *Senecas Tod* (1978), *Der Geldgott* (a free adaptation of Aristophanes' *Ploutos*, 1991); cf. Andrea Jäger, *Der Dramatiker Peter Hacks: Vom Produktionsstück zur Klassizität* (Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1986); Volker Riedel, "Utopien und Wirklichkeit: Soziale Entwürfe in den Antikestücken von Peter Hacks," *Gymnasium* 109 (2002): 49–68, reprinted in: V.R., "Der Beste der Griechen – Achill das Vieh". Aufsätze und Vorträge zur literarischen Antikerezeption II (Jena: Verlag Dr. Bussert & Stadel, 2002), 195–209, 299–302; Peter Schütze, *Peter Hacks: Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik des Dramas* (Kronberg: Scriptor Verlag, 1976); Ronald Weber, *Peter Hacks, Heiner Müller und das antagonistische Drama des Sozialismus*, Deutsche Literatur – Studien und Quellen 20 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

17 *Philoktet* (1958/1964) *Herakles 5* (1966), *König Ödipus* (trans. 1967, using Hölderlin), *Der Horatier* (1968), *Prometheus* (trans. 1969, using an interlineary translation by P. Witzmann), *Zement* – with 'Intermedien': *Prometheus, Herakles, Ödipus und Medea* (1972), *Verkommenes Ufer – Medeamaterial – Landschaft mit Argonauten* (1982), *Perser* (trans. 1992, using an interlineary translation by P. Witzmann). In addition there are three "Tragödien-Szenarien": *Elektratext* (1969), *Medeaspiel* (1974), *Bildbeschreibung* (for a production of Euripides' *Alkestis* by Robert Wilson, 1989) and a number of poems.

18 *Seneca* (1971, unpublished), *Odysseus' Heimkehr* (1979), *Antiope und Theseus* (1979), *Laokoon* (1980), *Iokaste Felsen Meer* (1984), *Orestobsession* (1988); cf. Verena Thimme, *Zwischen Rebellion und Resignation: Das dramatische Frühwerk des DDR-Autors Stefan Schütz* (Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2008).

19 *Hundsprozeß* (1964), *Herakles* (1967), *Die Ermordung des Aias oder Ein Exkurs über das Holzhacken* (1971), *Staschek oder Das Leben des Ovid* (1973).

20 A tetralogy, consisting of *Niobe*, *Klytaimestra*, *Iphigeneia*, and *Niobe am Sipylos* (between 1975 and 1979), as well as a free translation of Euripides' *Phoenissae* (1980).

21 *Nausikaa* (1963/64), *Halsgericht*, 2. Teil: *Der Angeklagte; Komödie nach der Apologie des Apuleius* (1987).

22 Jürgen Dummer and Bernd Seidensticker, "DDR" in *Der Neue Pauly*, ed. by Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider and Manfred Landfester.

23 Of some importance for the development were the guest performances by the Piraikon theatre under the director Dimitris Rondiris in 1962. His productions of Sophocles' *Elektra* and Euripides' *Medea* (with Aspasia Papathanassiou in the leading roles) made a strong impression.

reception of antiquity allowed authors and artists to evade the aesthetic constraints of “Socialist Realism”, the official artistic concept of the regime from its beginning in 1949 until the end of the GDR.

The evasion or retreat into Greek myth or Roman history could be defended by a reference to the great father figure of GDR literature Bertolt Brecht, who throughout his life worked with ancient history and literature. Or to classical socialist thinkers and writers, such as Marx and Engels, Lenin and Liebknecht, who repeatedly stressed the importance of the Greeks for the development of humanism. Of special importance was Lenin’s fourth thesis on proletarian culture. It proclaimed that “Marxism has won its historic significance as the ideology of the revolutionary proletariat because, far from rejecting the most valuable achievements of the bourgeois epoch, it has, on the contrary, assimilated and refashioned everything of value in the more than two thousand years of the development of human thought and culture.”

The program that is implied in this thesis was taken up by the leading cultural ideologists of the GDR and developed into the official concept called *Kulturelles Erbe*, “cultural heritage”. At a meeting of the central committee of the communist party Walter Ulbricht proclaimed “that given the decadence of late capitalism it is necessary that we diligently preserve the great tradition of our humanistic heritage for the benefit of our people.”<sup>24</sup>

Ulbricht and his followers in the ministry of culture were, of course, talking about the affirmative socialistic interpretation and utilisation of the literary and artistic achievements of the great periods of our European past. However, it is obvious that – under the wide umbrella of the official cultural (or rather ideological) policy – authors (and theatres) could put the classical tradition to quite different uses.

For the retreat into antiquity did not only offer artistic alternatives but also opened up interesting political possibilities. It could be used as a vehicle of more or less open criticism aimed against political or cultural developments. Socialistic utopias could be sketched as a contrast to the much shabbier reality of the contemporary GDR; the history or the present state of the communist party could be discussed, and one’s own position and situation as an intellectual within the regime could be defined.

In 1902, in his essay “What is to be done”, Lenin stated: “In a country ruled by an autocracy, in which the press is completely shackled, and in a period of intense political reaction in which even the tiniest outgrowth of political discontent and protest is suppressed, the theory of revolutionary Marxism suddenly forces its way into the censored literature, written in *Aesopian language* but understood by the ‘interested.’” It is the paradoxical irony of history that fifty years later many authors in the GDR resorted to Lenin’s tactical concept

24 Cf. Gerhard Zinserling, *Das klassische Altertum in der sozialistischen Kultur*, Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich Schiller Universität Jena 18 April (1969): 6.

of *Aesopian language* (also called *slavish tongue*), and turned it not against the capitalist enemy, but against shortcomings and failures of communism and undesired developments within the GDR.<sup>25</sup>

Theatres had to be cautious, though, since their repertoires and productions, as I outlined at the beginning, were closely monitored by the cultural bureaucracy and by the party. There were many cases in which production was forbidden before the first performance or directly after it, or where the directors were forced to change their conceptions considerably. At the end of this article I will briefly discuss an especially interesting example of this, a production of the *Seven against Thebes* at the *Berlin Ensemble* (the *BE*) in Berlin.

Hacks and Besson in their production of *Peace* made sparing use of allusions to politics, politicians, or censorship, and there are only traces of *Aesopian language*.<sup>26</sup> Hacks at the beginning of the sixties had considerable problems with the mandarins of the department of culture. Twice he had to rewrite his play *Die Sorgen und die Macht* (*The Worries and the Power*).<sup>27</sup> Other plays of his could not be staged or were quickly taken off the program. So the poet had reason to restrain his criticism if he wanted to be staged.<sup>28</sup> At the end of

25 Plays by the German classical authors Goethe and Schiller and others were used in the same way; cf. Wolfgang Engel, "Eine Art von indirektem Siegel," in Michael Raab, *Wolfgang Engel: Regie im Theater* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991), 37: "Die DDR Bürger hatten gelernt, zweisprachig miteinander zu leben oder aber eine Sprache zu sprechen und eine andere zu meinen, man könnte das in einem negativen Sinne als die Sklavensprache bezeichnen, die es offensichtlich auch war. Auf diese Weise konnte unter Gleichgesinnten eine Verständigung hervorgerufen werden, mit der man aber nicht aneckte. Anhand eines alten Stückes Machtstrukturen der DDR aufzudecken bzw. die Beschädigung des Individuums durch Machtstrukturen zu erzählen, war bis zur Beendigung der DDR eine vornehme Aufgabe des Theaters, es bildete so eine Art von indirektem Spiegel." Cf. Ernst Schumacher, "DDR-Dramatik und das 11. Plenum," in Günter Agde, *Kahlschlag: Das 11. Plenum des ZK der DDR*, 102f.: "Peter Hacks und Heiner Müller haben es seitdem vorgezogen, ihre Ansichten über die Gesellschaft in Parabeln, in Legenden, in geschichtliche Stoffe einzukleiden. Sie haben sich nicht mehr unmittelbar geäußert. Auf diese Weise entstand auch eine neue 'Sklavensprache' in der Dramatik, und diese Sklavensprache ist von allen Eingeweihten verstanden worden. Gerade die Stücke, die in dieser Richtung etwas geboten haben, waren ja dann die gefragtesten." – There are a number of critics who astonishingly do not believe that the use of ancient plays and topics by Müller, Hacks, and others had anything to do with the problems the poets encountered and with *Aesopian language*; cf. e.g. Jürgen Schröder, in *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart*, Wilfried Barner, ed. (München 2006), 570: "Mit Flucht aus der Gegenwart oder der Suche nach einer <Sklavensprache> hatte dieser Weg nichts zu tun. Wie bei Hacks, Lange und anderen handelte sich zunächst um einen Erbevorgang: analog zur bürgerlichen Literatur des 18. Jahrhunderts eignete sich nun die Literatur des vierten Standes das antike und klassische Erbe an."

26 Cf. Seidensticker, "Aristophanes is back," 200–203.

27 The problems began with the premiere in 1960 (in Senftenberg) and did not end with the production of an amended version at *Das Deutsche Theater* in 1962, which was severely criticised. Hacks lost his position as author and dramaturge at the *DT*; cf. Hasche, Schölling und Fiebach, *Theater in der DDR*, 45–47, and the material published by the *DT* after the fall of the wall in 1991: "Der Fall die Sorgen und die Macht 1962/63: Dokumente," *Blätter des Deutschen Theaters* 19, 1991, and in Kreuzer und Schmidt, *Dramaturgie*, 259–97; cf. also Rischbieter, *Durch den eisernen Vorhang*, 92.

28 The few satirical remarks about critics and censorship certainly were understood by the audience as his answer to the criticism of his work, and the same holds true for the parabasis: Where the Aristophanic chorus praises the poet's fight against the monster Cleon, Hacks, to evoke his own controversies with the cultural bureaucrats, only had to cut Cleon and generalize the lines into "the eternal battle of art against the mighty, which the artist always loses, but which art always wins."

the first part of the *parabasis* of *Peace* there is an inconspicuous, but significant change. Whereas the Aristophanic chorus asks the jury to honour the poet's poetic and political achievements, i.e. to award him the first prize in the competition, Hacks adds an idea that can be found in many ancient texts from Ibycus to Horace, but not in Aristophanes:

Honour him, you authoritative bald heads,  
and honour yourselves in honouring him.  
...  
Make your changes, by supporting him, eternal.

The bald heads, which Hacks' chorus here addresses, clearly, as the attribute *authoritative* shows, refer to the leading politicians of the regime, whose "changes", i.e. the socialist revolution, Hacks promises to make immortal if his art is not restricted but supported and promoted. Already the ironical mocking of politicians, critics, and censorship are rather general and lacking real bite; and here it appears that Hacks does not use the ancient text to criticise the mighty and their politics. To be sure, the chorus praises the poet who dares to attack the powerful and speaks of the perpetual battle between art and power, but then all it does is asking for acknowledgement and support. Hacks' final goal is not "the perpetual fight against the mighty", but the patronage of the regime. Moreover, Hacks' wish became true; not immediately perhaps, but in the long run. The sensational success of his adaptation of *Peace* certainly contributed to the fact that after all his problems with the cultural bureaucracy Hacks was finally accepted and honoured. Since the seventies he was the most-played contemporary dramatist in the GDR.

Heiner Müller, the most important dramatist of the GDR, was less adaptable – and less successful on the stage. Born in 1923, he began his career in the fifties with realistic plays about social and economic problems in the early GDR. After difficulties with political censorship that increasingly hampered the production of his plays,<sup>29</sup> Müller turned to antiquity. He produced two translations – first of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*<sup>30</sup> for Benno Besson's production in 1967, which was almost as successful as Hacks' adaptation of

29 Cf. below, note 33.

30 *Ödipus, Tyrann*; Müller's text is an adaptation of Hölderlin's translation, but with his own political interpretation of the story; cf. Georg Wiegand, *Zwischen Auftrag und Verrat: Werk und Ästhetik Heiner Müllers* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1984), 131: "Hat der Kommunismus – so fragt Müllers 'Ödipus Tyrann' – der für sich in Anspruch nimmt, das Rätsel der Geschichte gelöst zu haben, in seiner eigenen bisherigen 'realsozialistischen' Geschichte nicht gezeigt, wie stark er immer noch dem rätselhaften, menschenfressenden Prinzip der Sphinx verhaftet ist? Steht die exzessive, triebhafte Gewalt nicht auch am Anfang der mit der Oktoberrevolution angeblich begonnenen neuen Menschheitsepoche? Und ist nicht auch das heutige Theben nur dann zu retten, wenn es sich schonungslos konfrontiert mit diesem seinem Ursprung?" With the self-blinding at the end Oedipus – so Wiegand – represents the intellectual who shirks his political responsibility. For Besson's production of the play cf. Hellmut Flashar, *Inszenierung der Antike: Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit* (München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2009), 266f.

Aristophanes' *Peace*, and then of Aeschylus' *Prometheus* (in 1969) for a production of the play in Zurich. And he wrote *Philoktet*, his best 'Greek' play, based on Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, followed by a satyr play-like farce about Hercules' cleaning of the stables of Augias, (title: *Herakles 5*)<sup>31</sup> and by a short didactic play in the Brechtian tradition called *Der Horatier* (*The Horation*). The Akmé of Müller's Antikerezeption was in the sixties, but he continued to work with Greek myths until the end of his life in 1995.<sup>32</sup>

I will first look at *Philoktet* and then concentrate on *Der Horatier*, both plays being highly instructive examples for Müller's use of *Aesopian language*. However, before focusing on these two plays, which Müller wrote in the sixties, I want to should look at an early poem by Müller that can be read as a programmatic statement about the necessity of using Aesopian language.

The hexametric text is called *Tales from Homer*<sup>33</sup> and uses a famous episode in the second book of the *Iliad*. There, Thersites attacks Atreus in the general assembly for always taking most of the booty for himself and suggests to the Achaeans that they no longer fight for such a bad leader, but return home. He is then not only sharply criticised by Odysseus, but badly beaten up.<sup>34</sup>

In the first part of the poem Homer is asked by his pupils why he puts the bitter truth about the Trojan war into the mouth of Thersites and then discredits this truth by having Thersites criticised, walloped, and derided:

How is that with this Thersites

You let him say the right words but then with your own words  
You prove him wrong. This seems to be difficult to understand.  
Why did you do it?

31 Müller tried, "verzweifelt und vergeblich," to persuade Benno Besson, to use the play, which was written 1964/65, as a satyr play for his production of *Ödipus, Tyrann* (cf. note 30).

32 Cf. note 17.

33 *Geschichten von Homer – 1 – Häufig redeten und ausgiebig mit dem Homer die / Schüler deutend sein Werk, ihn fragend um richtige Deutung. / Denn es liebte der Alte immer sich neu zu entdecken / Und gepriesen geizte nicht mit Wein und Gebratnem. / Kam die Rede, beim Gastmahl, Fleisch und Wein, auf Thersites / Den Geschmähten, den Schwätzer, der aufstand in der Versammlung / Nutzte klug der Großen Streit um das größere Beutstück / Sprach: Sehet an den Völkerhirten, der seine Schafe / Schert und hinmacht wie immer ein Hirt, und zeigte die blutigen / Leeren Hände der Söldner als leer und blutig den Söldnern. / Da nun fragten die Schüler: Wie ist das mit diesem Thersites / Meister? Du gibst ihm die richtigen Worte, dann gibst du mit eignen / Worten ihm unrecht. Schwierig scheint das uns zu begreifen. / Warum tatst du? Sagte Homer: Zu Gefallen der Fürsten. / Fragten die Schüler: Wozu das? Der Alte: Aus Hunger. Nach Lorbeer? / Auch. Doch schätzt er den gleich hoch wie auf dem Scheitel im Fleischtopf. – 2 – Unter den Schülern, heißt es, sei aber einer gewesen / Klug, ein großer Frager. Jede Antwort befragt er / Noch, zu finden die nicht mehr fragliche. Dieser nun fragte / Sitzend am Fluß mit dem Alten, noch einmal die Frage der andern. / Prüfend ansah der Alte den Jungen und sagte, ihn ansehnd / Heiter: Ein Pfeil ist die Wahrheit, giftig dem eiligen Schützen! / Schon den Bogen spannen ist viel. Der Pfeil bleibt ein Pfeil ja / Birgt wer im Schilf ihn. Die Wahrheit, gekleidet in Lüge, bleibt Wahrheit / Und der Bogen stirbt nicht mit dem Schützen. Sprachs und erhob sich.*

34 Homer, *Ilias* 2.211–277.



And Homer answers: “To be liked by the princes.” And when they ask, why he would have wanted to be liked by the princes, he explains: “From hunger.” And when they still do not quite understand him, he adds that it was not the hunger for laurel, i.e. for glory and fame, but for food that made him do it. The poet cannot write as he pleases, at least if he wants to publish and to eat. Political circumstances and power structure can prevent the open advocacy of the political truth.

Already here the political topicality is obvious, but Müller in the second part of the poem goes one step further; the most intelligent of Homer’s disciples is not satisfied by the answers of his master and repeats the question when the two are alone. And now Müller’s Homer gives a second and more profound justification for not saying openly and directly what he thinks. It is not only that the truth leaves pot and pan empty and that it does not provide any laurel: the truth is dangerous, and already to bend the bow to shoot the arrow of truth is an accomplishment. For “*the arrow is still an arrow if one hides it in the reed*”. Namely, even if the author hides the truth among his lies – as the truth of Thersites is hidden among the lies of the context – it remains a potentially deadly weapon that can be understood and used by others. Müller thus – practising the lesson of his fable in his poem – gives an eminently political comment on the situation of poets, or intellectuals in general, who live and work under a totalitarian regime.

Müller had personally experienced what he was talking about: In 1962, after a heated ideological discussion about his second play, he was expelled from the writers union of the GDR, which meant that he had serious problems in earning his living through writing.<sup>35</sup>

Let us now look at two of Müller’s dramatic texts, which are instructive examples for his use of Aesopian language: first *Philoktet* and then *Der Horatier*.

*Philoktet* is a free adaptation of Sophocles *Philoctetes* (staged in 409).<sup>36</sup> Müller cut the chorus, eliminated fate and the gods (including the *deus ex machina* Heracles), and significantly modified the characters (especially Neoptolemus and Philoctetes, who both are much less appealing than in Sophocles); but for more than three quarters of his play he follows the dramatic action of the Sophoclean tragedy fairly closely. He finally breaks away from

35 In 1961 *Die Umsiedlerin*, a play about the land reform in the GDR, was severely criticized as reactionary, the director B. K. Tragelehn and others who were part of the production were expelled from the party, and Müller was excluded from the Schriftstellerverband; cf. Marianne Streisand, “Chronik einer Ausgrenzung: Der Fall Heiner Müller, Dokumente zur ‘Umsiedlerin’,” *Sinn und Form* 43 (1991) vol. 3; Hasche, Schölling und Fiebach, *Theater*, 43f.; Matthias Braun, *Drama um eine Komödie* (Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1996); Reinhard Tschapke, *Heiner Müller*, 1996, 24–27.

36 For detailed comparisons of the two plays cf. Manfred Kraus, “Heiner Müller und die griechische Tragödie: Dargestellt am Beispiel des Philoktet,” *Poetica* 17 (1985): 299–339; Bettina Gruber, *Mythen in den Dramen Heiner Müllers* (Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1989), 21–33; Eva C. Huller, *Griechisches Theater in Deutschland: Mythos und Tragödie bei Heiner Müller und Botho Strauß* (Wien: Böhlau Verlag, 2007), 46–102.

Sophocles at the moment when Philoctetes gets the bow back from Neoptolemus and is about to kill Odysseus. In the Sophoclean play Neoptolemus stops Philoctetes so that Odysseus can escape. In Müller's version of the story neither Neoptolemus nor Odysseus, who does not run away, but stays and faces Philoctetes, can overcome Philoctetes' burning hatred towards Odysseus and all Greeks, and Neoptolemus, finally, to prevent Philoctetes from killing Odysseus, is forced to kill him. (Stage direction: he picks up the sword and runs it through Philoctetes' back.)

In both plays it looks – for a moment – as if the goal of the action cannot be reached: Sophocles uses a *deus ex machina* to resolve the impasse, as Hercules appears and persuades Philoctetes to go to Troy. Müller dispenses with a divine solution and has Odysseus come up with yet another trick, with the help of which the dead Philoctetes will achieve what the living Philoctetes was supposed to bring about. By lying that the Trojans killed Philoctetes (and from behind), they will be able to trick his men into returning to the battlefield that they abandoned because of their chief's exposure.

The play was published in the prestigious monthly journal *Sinn und Form* (17, 1965, 733–65), and Müller's dramatic rival Hacks was full of praise. However, the official reaction was critical, and the play could not be staged for a long time.<sup>37</sup> In fact, for more than ten years – between 1957 and 1968 – only Müller's translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and of Aeschylus' *Prometheus* were played in the GDR, whereas in the West he was quickly recognized as the most important dramatist of the GDR and was staged regularly. But Müller did not leave the GDR – as his younger colleagues and friends Stefan Schütz and Hartmut Lange – because, as he put it himself, “to live in the GDR meant to live within a material.”<sup>38</sup>

If one reads the analyses by critics and academics in the GDR, it is not evident why Müller had to wait twelve years to see his *Philoktet* performed by a major theatre in the GDR. For the play was taken as an anti-imperialistic anti-war play,<sup>39</sup> and Müller at first played along with this official reading by stating that *Philoktet* was “a parable about events and processes that are only possible in a class society with antagonistic interests” (i.e. not in socialist

37 It was first produced in the West (1968, Residenztheater München); first productions in the GDR: 1974 by a student theatre group, Karl-Marx-Stadt, and 1977 by *Das Deutsche Theater*, Berlin; for the history of production cf. Jan Christoph Hauschild, *Heiner Müller oder Das Prinzip Zweifel: Eine Biographie* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2001), 253–55.

38 *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 3. 9. 1994: “Der Aufenthalt in der DDR war in erster Linie Aufenthalt in einem Material.” In his poem *Ausreisen 2/3/4/5* Müller speaks of his “wütende Liebe zu meinem Land”; there was a joke in the GDR about Müller remaining in the GDR, because the tax return forms were easier to fill out than in the BRD; cf. Tschapke, *Heiner Müller* (Berlin: Morgenbuch, 1996), 39–43.

39 Cf. e.g. Werner Mittenzwei, “Eine alte Fabel neu erzählt: Heiner Müllers ‘Philoktet,’” *Sinn und Form* 17 (1965): 948–56; Trilse, *Antike und Theater heute*, 85–110, 89; Rüdiger Bernhardt, “Antikerezeption im Werk Heiner Müllers,” *Weimarer Beiträge* 22 (1976): 83–122; Wilhelm Girnus, in “Gespräch mit Heiner Müller,” *Sinn und Form* 18 (1966): 42; Girnus refers, however to (anonymous) critics, who believe that *Philoktet* was a decidedly anti-party play.

societies).<sup>40</sup> The real reason, however, for the rejection of the play by the cultural bureaucracy most probably was, that *Philoktet* is much more than an anti-imperialistic anti-war play and that Müller was not – or at least not only – writing about problems in pre-socialist societies, but about past and present problems and aberrations in the world of communism. Critics in the West had immediately read the play as a parable about the power-struggles within the communist party (Rischbieter). The Trojan war was understood as a symbol for the still undecided class struggle (Schulz) or a metaphor for the world revolution (Schivelbusch),<sup>41</sup> in the course of which everybody and everything is instrumentalised and measured by its usefulness for the common goal.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, after the first production of the play Müller openly agreed with this reading: “In my version of the play the battle for Troy is nothing but an image or picture for the socialist revolution in stagnation.” ... In the early sixties one could not write a play about Stalinism; one had to use a kind of model if one wanted to ask the real questions. The people here understand that quite quickly.<sup>43</sup> And in his autobiography Müller revealed a biographical aspect of the play by comparing *Philoktetes*’ situation with his isolation<sup>44</sup> after the political storm about *Die Umsiedlerin*.<sup>45</sup>

*Philoktet* is a complex play, and there is not enough space here to give a detailed introduction to Müller’s explosive political parable. The second text of Müller’s is a similar parable, but shorter and somewhat simpler: *Der Horatier*.

Müller wrote *Der Horatier* (*The Horatian*) in 1968. The play is based on the famous story from Rome’s mythical past, which Livy reports in 1.22–26,

40 Cf. *Sinn und Form* 18, 1966, 43: “Die beiden Interpretationen, die sie anführten, klammern eine Grundvoraussetzung der Geschichte aus, nämlich die Tatsache, daß die Vorgänge, die das Stück beschreibt, nur in Klassengesellschaften mit antagonistischen Widersprüchen möglich sind, zu deren Bedürfnissen Raubkriege gehören. Das ist entscheidend für das Verständnis der Vorgänge. Für uns ist das Vorgeschichte.”

41 Henning Rischbieter, “Ein finsternes Stück. Heiner Müllers ‘Philoktet’”, *Theater heute* 9 (1968): 28–31 (anti-Stalinist critique of the power-struggles in the central committee); Genia Schulz, 71 (analysis of the internal problems of the communist politics); Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Sozialistisches Drama nach Brecht* (Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1974), 125f. (a parable about the totality of contradictions regarding both the communist history and the socialist present).

42 Cf. Schröder in: Barner, *Geschichte*, 570f., who speaks of a “blutige Kostenrechnung der Revolution; das nackte Modell einer Machtpolitik, die alle ihre Mittel mit rücksichtsloser Konsequenz und Rationalität dem Erreichen des Ziels (Eroberung Trojas/Weltrevolution) unterordnet.” Wolfgang Emmerich, “Antike Mythen auf dem Theater der DDR: Geschichte und Poesie, Vernunft und Terror,” in *Dramatik der DDR*, ed. by Ulrich Profitlich (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), 237f. interprets the end as a “victory of instrumental reason.” Cf. also Georg Wieghaus, *Heiner Müller* (München: C. H. Beck Verlag, 1981), 62f.; Tschapke, *Heiner Müller*, 28–30.

43 Rotwelsch, 75, 77 (interview with Sylvie Lotringer); in a radio interview in 1978 (shortly after the premiere of the play in the GDR) Müller declared: “Als das Stück geschrieben wurde, so in den Jahren 58–64 ungefähr, war das auch eine Auseinandersetzung mit Problemen und Fehlentwicklungen, die z.B. mit der Person Stalins zusammenhängen”; cf. Horst Laube and Brigitte Landes, “Hat Heiner Müller gelogen?” *Theaterbuch I* (München): 259.

44 Heiner Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht, Leben in zwei Diktaturen* (Köln 1992), 187: “Danach, von 1961 bis 1963 war ich zwei Jahre tabu, selbst eine Art Insel, und in der Zeit habe ich dann *Philoktet* geschrieben. Das war nur so möglich, ...” Wieghaus, *Heiner Müller* had anticipated this biographical aspect in his interpretation of *Philoktet*; cf. 117 and 127f.

45 Cf. note 34.

and which before Müller had already been used by Aretino, Corneille and by Brecht for his *Lehrstück Die Horatier und die Kuriatier*. Müller turned the story into a short epic text in the tradition of Brecht's didactic plays, the so-called "Lehrstücke."<sup>46</sup>

Whereas Brecht put the fight between the three Horatians and the three Curiatians into the centre of his didactic play about revolutionary cunning, Müller concentrates on the aftermath. He compressed the first four chapters of Livy's report – from the beginning of the war to the victory of the Horatian – into a short exposition, which, while preserving the gist of Livy's narrative, comprises only about a tenth of his text. The killing of the Curiatian is immediately followed by the killing of the sister, which in turn, as in Livy, is followed by the trial of the "doer of the two different deeds". Which is to say by a debate over whether "the Horatian should be honoured as a victor or punished as a murderer", but the form, result, and function of the trial have little in common with the ancient source.

In the first part of the proceedings the indissoluble antithesis of *merit* and *guilt* leads to a deadlock.<sup>47</sup> However, then the people decide – "with one voice" – to distinguish the identity of conqueror and murderer and to give to both what they deserve:

Let each receive his due:  
To the conqueror the laurels,  
To the murderer the sword.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the Horatian is first honoured for the victory over Alba and then put to death for the murder of his sister.

In the second part of the trial the assembly faces the question of how to treat the corpse of the victorious murderer or murderous victor, and again the Romans vote "with one voice" to preserve the "double truth". The corpse is first honoured by all Romans, but then, despite the pleas of the old father, thrown to the dogs. In answer to the father's appeal not to punish his son beyond death, the dramatic narrator stresses the paradigmatic character of the event and insists that only the radical analysis and documentation of the truth can set an example:

46 The narrative form (the story is told in the third person and in the past tense) creates epic distance; the rhythmical language, the detailed description of gestures and movements of the characters, the composition by scenes and the ample use of direct speech lend the text a distinct dramatic quality.

47 *And the one who bore the laurels said: / His service quits his crime. / And the one who bore the axe said: / His crime undoes his service. / And the one who bore the laurels asked: / Should the victor be punished? / And the one who bore the axe asked: / Should the murderer be honoured? / And the one who bore the laurels said: / If the murderer is punished, / The victor is punished. / And the one who bore the axe said: / If the victor is honoured, / The murderer is honoured. / And the people looked upon him / That had committed the two deeds, one man, undivisible / And were silent.*

48 "Jedem das Seine. / Dem Sieger den Lorbeer. Dem Mörder das Beil."

Longer than Rome shall rule over Alba,  
 Shall his Rome be remembered and the example  
 It gas given or not given,  
 Weighing one against the other in the scales  
 Or cleanly marking service from the crime  
 In what one man, indivisible, had done,  
 Fearing the impure truth or not fearing it.  
 For half an example is no example.  
 What is not taken to its proper end  
 Crawls to nothing.<sup>49</sup>

The short last part of the text develops the question of the preservation of the event for posterity. One of the Romans asks:

What shall we call the Horatian for those after us?<sup>50</sup>

And the people answer, for the third time “*with one voice*”:

He shall be called the victor over Alba.  
 He shall be called the killer of his sister.  
 In one breath both his service and his crime.<sup>51</sup>

The reasoning added in support of the decision shows that Müller is aiming at the preservation of historical truth in words, whether this be through literature, historiography, journalism – or theatre:

For our words must remain pure. Because  
 A sword can be broken, and a man  
 Can also be broken, but words  
 Fall irrevocably into the wheels of the world,  
 Making things known to us or unknown.  
 Deadly to humans is what they cannot understand.<sup>52</sup>

49 “Länger als Rom über Alba herrschen wird / Wird nicht zu vergessen sein Rom und das Beispiel / Das es gegeben hat oder nicht gegeben / Abwägend mit der Waage des Händlers gegen einander / Oder reinlich scheidend Schuld und Verdienst / Des unteilbaren Täters verschiedener Taten / Fürchtend die unreine Wahrheit oder nicht fürchtend / Und das halbe Beispiel ist kein Beispiel / Was nicht getan wird ganz bis zum wirklichen Ende / Kehrt ins Nichts am Zügel der Zeit im Krebsgang.”

50 “Wie soll der Horatier genannt werden der Nachwelt.”

51 “Er soll genannt werden der Sieger über Alba / Er soll genannt werden der Mörder seiner Schwester / Mit einem Atem sein Verdienst und seine Schuld.”

52 “Nämlich die Worte müssen rein bleiben. Denn / Ein Schwert kann zerbrochen werden und ein Mann / Kann auch zerbrochen werden, aber die Worte / Fallen in das Getriebe der Welt uneinholbar / Kennlich machend die Dinge oder unkenntlich. / Tödlich dem Menschen ist das Unkenntliche.”

The epilogue is given to the actors who have narrated the events and now add a closing commentary:

Thus, expecting the enemy, they set – not afraid  
 Of the impure truth – a provisional example  
 Of clean distinction, and didn't hide the rest,  
 That was not resolved in the irresistible change of things.<sup>53</sup>

This conclusion once again underlines the thesis of Müller's paradoxical paradigm. The solution propagated by Müller's Romans is paradigmatic because by the clear distinction of merit and guilt they do not cover up, but uncover the *impure truth*, i.e. the ambivalent truth of political reality in which positive and negative, necessary and unnecessary violence are indivisibly intertwined, both in individuals and in historical processes.

Many critics have felt that the moral of *Der Horatier* to bear and preserve the impure truth of the inseparable mingling of merit and guilt, of necessary and unnecessary violence, is yet another of Müller's contributions to the Stalin-debate of the sixties.<sup>54</sup>

I agree. However, as a later statement by Müller shows, there was a more specific political impulse behind the conception of this text. In his autobiography published in 1992, Müller wrote: "The text was my reaction to Prague. *Der Horatier* could not be staged. There was an attempt by the *Berliner Ensemble* to put it on stage, but it was prohibited by the political secretary in charge. The argument was that the text reflected the Prague-position, the claim to give the power to the intellectuals."<sup>55</sup>

In this sense, the adjective *vorläufig* (*provisional*), used by Müller to limit the validity of the example the Romans tried to set, unveils its true meaning. The text is a presentation of the Czechoslovak 'provisional' attempt to set an example. At the same time, it was Müller's appeal not to suppress the truth about the events in Prague in the necessary debate about the merits and guilt of communist socialism.

No wonder that the production of the text, planned by the *Berliner Ensemble* (*BE*) in Berlin, was forbidden. The play was first produced five years later in Hamburg and had to wait no less than twenty years before it was finally staged in the GDR.

53 "So stellten sie auf, nicht fürchtend die unreine Wahrheit / In Erwartung des Feinds ein vorläufiges Beispiel / Reinlicher Scheidung, nicht verbergend den Rest / Der nicht aufging im unaufhaltbaren Wandel."

54 An open anti-Stalinist play is Hartmut Lange's satirical farce *Der Hundsprozeß* (1964; one year before Lange fled the GDR via Yugoslavia to West Berlin). Lange later (in 1967) added a second play about Stalin, *Herakles*, in which he (as he states in an interlude) introduced Heracles as metaphor for Dshugaschwili: "ein großer Arbeiter," der "hin und wieder an blutigem Wahnsinn erkrankte." Cf. Hartmut Lange, *Der Hundsprozeß, Herakles*, Edition Suhrkamp 262 (Frankfurt 1968).

55 Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht*, 58f.

My last short example for the use of Aesopian language in the theatre of the GDR is a production of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* at the *Berliner Ensemble*, which also was intended to be understood as a reaction to the events in Czechoslovakia.<sup>56</sup>

The play was chosen for production already in 1967,<sup>57</sup> i.e. sometime before Dubček's attempt to create a "socialism with a human face" and the brutal repression of all hopes. The first version of the play, which the two young directors, Matthias Langhoff and Manfred Karge, had produced on the basis of all available German translations,<sup>58</sup> met with general approval, and the only reason, why the play was not produced in the season of 1967/68, was that the theatre first decided to produce Peter Weiß's *Viet Nam Diskurs*. When Langhoff and Karge started with rehearsals in 1968, however, the so-called Prague spring lent the production much greater topicality. The fraternal conflict of the Aeschylean tragedy had turned into a metaphor for the growing tensions between the two communist 'brother states' and its climax, the invasion of 'big brother' USSR, joined by troops of the Warsaw Pact, which included troops of the GDR. The parallel suggested itself, but the two young directors, Matthias Langhoff and Manfred Karge, added a new ending, which left no doubt about their intention to present the Aeschylean play as a parable for the events in Prague and the conclusions to be drawn by the development. When the messenger, who had brought the news that Eteocles and Polyneices had killed each other, invites the chorus to sing the funeral dirge, a vivid controversial discussion begins about who was responsible for the war and the tragic death of the brothers. It is agreed that both sons of Oedipus are to blame, because Eteocles did not have the right to keep the power and to drive his brother into exile and Polyneices did not have the right to attack his country, and the chorus declares: "So let us bury them and be silent." However, two of the women of the chorus object and criticise their earlier silence:

I remained silent for a long time, and now I am to do the same  
And remain silent, if it happens again,  
the same, the disaster, the one without a name?<sup>59</sup>

Moreover, when the chorus argues that he could not speak up, while the enemy threatened to attack Thebes,<sup>60</sup> another woman asks:

56 I would like to thank Petra Hübner from the archive of the Berliner Ensemble for letting me look at the rich material about the production and for her generous help.

57 In the light of Brecht's lifelong interest in antiquity it is astonishing that *Sieben gegen Theben* was the first Greek tragedy that the *Berliner Ensemble* produced.

58 The text is a quite free adaptation with many cuts, additions, and transpositions of lines; cf the three versions of the text (I 1967; II 1968/ III 1969) in the archive of the *Berliner Ensemble*.

59 *Lange schon schwieg ich und soll dabei bleiben / Um wieder zu schweigen, wenn wieder geschehe / Das Gleiche, das Unheil, das ohne Namen?*

60 *So hätt' ich reden sollen, als der Feind / Mit Pferd und Wagen, Eisen und Geschrei / Verwüstung schwor der Stadt und Tod? / War's richtig nicht, zu schweigen?* – The same motif can be found in Müller's *Der Horatier*, where the Romans discuss whether it is the right time to discuss the punishment of the Horatian in the face of the impending attack of the Etruscans (cf. also note 55).

And before the enemy came?  
 Why have I been silent then?  
 Did he not come, because I was silent? And now I am to do it again?<sup>61</sup>

And the chorus concedes its failure:

Now I realise – shamefully – my own guilt.  
 The lie turned into truth; I accepted it silently.  
 And by my silence, I nurtured the unlawful rule  
 Until my silence turned against myself.<sup>62</sup>

The chorus promises to speak and search for the hidden truth and demand an answer, whatever it may be.

Now, I wish to talk, even if it causes distress,  
 To banish the shadow that hangs over us,  
 To search for the truth that lies buried,  
 To demand the answer, whatever it may be.<sup>63</sup>

The new scene, which Langhoff and Karge substituted for the spurious Aeschylean ending, does not put most of the blame on the attacker Polyneices, as the first version does, where only the dead Eteocles is brought on stage and lamented, whereas Polyneices is cursed.<sup>64</sup> Now both brothers are brought on stage and the chorus, while some of its members want to blame only Polyneices, insist that both are guilty.<sup>65</sup> Of course, already the fact that Polyneices was blamed at all could be understood as criticism of the official position of the GDR, that had participated in the invasion. But the fact that Langhoff and Karge in the second version put much greater emphasis on the equal guilt of Eteocles suggests that their main political concern was not to condemn the Russian aggressor. Their main point is the announcement of the chorus to no longer remain silent, but

61 *Und eh der Feind kam, warum schwieg ich da? / Kam er nicht, weil ich schwieg? Jetzt soll ich's wieder tun.*

62 *Schamvoll entdeck ich die eigene Schuld / Lüge wurde Wahrheit, ich folgte ihr schweigend / Nährte durch Schweigen die rechtlose Herrschaft / Bis daß mein Schweigen sich gegen mich kehrte.*

63 *Reden will ich nun, entsteht auch Bedrängnis, / Den Schatten beschwören, der über uns lastet. / Suchen nach der verschütteten Wahrheit, / Die Antwort verlangen, wie immer sie ausfällt. – It is hardly by chance that this proclamation is similar to the ending of *Der Horatier*. Langhoff and Karge were close friends of Heiner Müller. – The second version then concludes with a request to the chorus that they bury the brothers, before the new power (i.e. the people) takes the helm in the polis: *Das Volk erwartet dich, komm, Tochter Thebens / Der Brauch verlangt, daß du zu Grabe trägst / den toten König, eh die neue Macht / An Bord der Stadt das Steuer nimmt.**

64 Only in the last six lines of the play does the chorus, while praising Eteocles as the saviour of the polis, concede that he was responsible for the attack on his brother: *Ihr, die ihr mit angesehen diesen Mann Eteokles / Wisst, dass wir ihn ehrend betten, ihn, der Thebens Retter war / Wenn er auch den Feind getötet, den er selber uns gebar.*

65 *Beide war'n Könige. Gleich ist die Schuld. / Grausame Rache suchte doch der, / Den grausames Unrecht davontrieb ... Der Streit war verbannt nicht, als er ihn verbannte. / Unrecht schuf Unrecht, wie Schlechtes das Schlechte.*



to raise their voice and ask questions. This request would have been taken by the audience as a call for participation in open political discourse, something unheard of not only in the context of the events in Prague but in general.<sup>66</sup>

No wonder that censors, as soon as they were briefed by informers from within the theatre, intervened, stopped the rehearsals, and forced the directors to cut the new ending<sup>67</sup> and make other smaller changes in the text and the staging. If it had not been for Helene Weigel, Brecht's wife and artistic director of the *Berliner Theater*, the play would not have reached the stage.<sup>68</sup> There were just ten performances, spread over a period of six months, and the 'tamed' third version without the explosive ending Langhoff and Karge had added at the height of the Czechoslovak revolution did not encounter any political objections from party or state authorities. Theatre reviews both in East and in West Germany even criticised the production's lack of political relevance.<sup>69</sup>

However, I must come to an end. The history of the theatre in the GDR shows that, when the theatre is under tight control – artistically and politically – authors and directors will try to undermine censorship with ever new forms of Aesopian language and, if I may say so, Aesopian performances; the audiences will become particularly sensitive to allusions and double meanings. We know of many cases in which the GDR audiences responded with applause to seemingly innocuous sentences or lines because they took them as a hidden comment on a politician or a current political or social problem. Moreover, I remember authors and theatre people who welcomed the new personal freedom after the unification of Germany, but complained that they had lost their wonderfully receptive audience for their manifold forms of Aesopian language.

Bernd Seidensticker  
Freie Universität Berlin  
bs1@zedat.fu-berlin.de

66 In the production concept the two directors stated their conviction that theatre in the GDR, like ancient Greek theatre, should discuss political and social issues.

67 Langhoff and Karge returned to the ending of the first version, but this time stayed closer to the Aeschylean original, except for the very last lines. When the chorus has lamented both brothers and decided to bury them both, a spokesman of the city council insists (as in the pseudo-Aeschylean ending) that only Eteocles, the defender of the polis, would be buried, while Polyneices, the enemy would be left unwept and unburied.

68 For the censorship process and the role of Helene Weigel cf. Bradley, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 100–107; ead., "Prager Luft at the Berliner Ensemble: The Censorship of *Sieben gegen Theben*, 1968/69," *German Life and Letters* 58 (2005): 41–54.

69 Cf. Bradley, *Prager Luft*, 52f. – In the leaflet for the production Langhoff and Karge tried to explain the political topicality of the *Seven against Thebes* on the basis of an interpretation of the tragedy, which is based on George Thomson's book *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*. Thomson understood the battle between Polyneices/Argos and Eteocles/Thebes as a battle between clanship and democracy. The play ends with the victory of polis order over blood bonds and family relations. Langhoff and Karge argue that the play, despite the fact that the socialist revolution is quite different from this change, can stimulate the audience to think about the contemporary 'Epochenumbruch': "Diese Sicht ist für uns, die wir eine ganz andere Revolution durchleben, bedeutsam, da sie uns dazu anregt, unser sozialistisches Bewußtsein zu formieren durch die Erfahrungen, die es aus einer Epochenkonfrontation zwischen damals und heute gewinnt."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- “Der Fall Die Sorgen und die Macht 1962/63: Dokumente.” *Blätter des Deutschen Theaters* 19 (1991).
- Agde, Günter. *Kahlschlag: Das 11. Plenum des ZK der SED 1965; Studien und Dokumente*. Berlin: Aufbau Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991.
- Baker, Barrie. *Theatre Censorship in Honecker's Germany: From Volker Braun to Samuel Beckett*. German Linguistic and Cultural Studies 23. Bern: Peter Lang, 2007.
- Bernhardt, Rüdiger. “Antikerezeption im Werk Heiner Müllers.” *Weimarer Beiträge* 22 (1976): 83–122.
- Bradley, Laura. “Prager Luft at the Berliner Ensemble: The Censorship of *Sieben gegen Theben*, 1968/69.” *German Life and Letters* 58 (2005): 41–54.
- . *Cooperation and Conflict: GDR Theatre Censorship, 1961–1989*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Braun, Matthias. *Drama um eine Komödie*. Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 1996.
- Dummer, Jürgen, and Bernd Seidensticker. “DDR.” In *Der Neue Pauly* 13, ed. by Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider and Manfred Landfester, 681–690. Stuttgart: Metzler, 1999.
- Emmerich, Wolfgang. “Antike Mythen auf dem Theater der DDR: Geschichte und Poesie, Vernunft und Terror.” In *Dramatik der DDR*, ed. by Ulrich Profitlich, 223–265. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987.
- Engel, Wolfgang. “Eine Art von indirektem Siegel.” In Michael Raab, *Wolfgang Engel: Regie im Theater*. Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1991.
- Flashar, Hellmut. *Inszenierung der Antike: Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit*. Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 2009.
- Girnius, Wilhelm. “Gespräch mit Heiner Müller.” *Sinn und Form* 18 (1966): 30–47.
- Goldsmith, Ulrich K. “Aristophanes in East Germany: Peter Hacks' Adaptation of Peace.” In *Hypatia: Essays in Classics, Comparative Literature, and Philosophy Presented to Hazel E. Barnes on Her 70. Birthday*, ed. by William M. Calder et al., 105–123. Colorado: Colorado Associated Press, 1985.
- Gruber, Bettina. *Mythen in den Dramen Heiner Müllers*. Essen: Die Blaue Eule, 1989.
- Hasche, Christa, Traute Schölling and Joachim Fiebach. *Theater in der DDR: Chronik und Positionen; Mit einem Essay von Ralph Hammerthaler*. Berlin: Henschel, 1994.
- Hauschild, Jan Christoph. *Heiner Müller oder Das Prinzip Zweifel: Eine Biographie*. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2001.
- Huller, Eva C. *Griechisches Theater in Deutschland: Mythos und Tragödie bei Heiner Müller und Botho Strauß*. Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2007.
- Jäger, Andrea. *Der Dramatiker Peter Hacks: Vom Produktionsstück zur Klassizität*. Marburg: Hitzeroth, 1986.
- Kraus, Manfred. “Heiner Müller und die griechische Tragödie: Dargestellt am Beispiel des *Philoktet*.” *Poetica* 17 (1985): 299–339.
- Kreuzer, Helmut, and Karl-Wilhelm Schmidt. *Dramaturgie in der DDR 1945–1990*. Vol. 2, 1970–1990. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1998.
- Lange, Hartmut. *Der Hundsprozeß, Herakles*. Edition Suhrkamp 262. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968.
- Laube, Horst, and Brigitte Landes. “Hat Heiner Müller gelogen?” *Theaterbuch* 1, 259–262. Munich 1978.
- Mittenzwei, Werner. “Eine alte Fabel neu erzählt: Heiner Müllers ‘Philoktet’.” *Sinn und Form* 17 (1965): 948–56.

- Müller, Heiner. *Krieg ohne Schlacht, Leben in zwei Diktaturen*. Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1992.
- Neuweg-Herwig, Christa. "Benno Bessons komödiantischer und kritischer Realismus." In *Durch den eisernen Vorhang: Theater im geteilten Deutschland 1945 bis 1990*, ed. by Henning Rischbieter, 105–116. Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 1999.
- Riedel, Volker. "Theaterfest Antike I–III." *Weimarer Beiträge* 31 (1985): 268–71.
- . "Utopien und Wirklichkeit: Soziale Entwürfe in den Antikestücken von Peter Hacks." *Gymnasium* 109 (2002): 49–68. Reprinted in Volker Riedel, *Der Beste der Griechen – Achill das Vieh: Aufsätze und Vorträge zur literarischen Antikerezeption* 2, 195–209, 299–302. Jena: Verlag Dr. Bussert & Stadelers, 2002.
- Rischbieter, Henning. "Ein finsternes Stück: Heiner Müllers 'Philoktet'." *Theater heute* 9 (1968): 28–31.
- Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *Sozialistisches Drama nach Brecht*. Darmstadt: Luchterhand, 1974.
- Schumacher, Ernst. "DDR-Dramatik und das 11. Plenum." In *Kahlschlag: Das 11. Plenum des ZK der DDR*, ed. by Günter Agde, 93–104. Berlin: Aufbau, 1991.
- Schütze, Peter. *Peter Hacks: Ein Beitrag zur Ästhetik des Dramas*. Kronberg: Scriptor Verlag, 1976.
- Seidensticker, Bernd. "'Aristophanes is back!' Peter Hacks's Adaptation of Peace." In *Aristophanes in Performance*, ed. by Edith Hall and Amanda Wrigley, 194–208. London: Legenda, 2007.
- Streisand, Marianne. "Chronik einer Ausgrenzung: Der Fall Heiner Müller, Dokumente zur 'Umsiedlerin'." *Sinn und Form* 43.3 (1991): 423–434.
- Stuber, Petra. *Spielräume und Grenzen: Studien zum DDR Theater*. Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2000.
- Stucke, Frank. *Die Aristophanes-Bearbeitungen von Peter Hacks*. Berlin: Tenea, 2002.
- Thimme, Verena. *Zwischen Rebellion und Resignation: Das dramatische Frühwerk des DDR-Autors Stefan Schütz*. Marburg: Tectum Verlag, 2008.
- Thomson, George. *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1941.
- Trilse, Christoph. *Antike und Theater heute*. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2nd ed. 1979.
- Tschapke, Reinhard. *Heiner Müller*. Berlin: Morgenbuch, 1996.
- Ulbricht, Walter. "Fragen der Entwicklung der sozialistischen Kultur und Kunst: Rede vor Schriftstellern, Brigaden der sozialistischen Arbeit und Kulturschaffenden in Bitterfeld am 24. April 1958." In *Zur sozialistischen Kulturrevolution: Dokumente 1957–59*, ed. by Marianne Lange, 455–77. Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1960.
- Ullrich, Renate. *Schweriner Entdeckungen: Ein Theater im Gespräch*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1986.
- Weber, Ronald. *Peter Hacks, Heiner Müller und das antagonistische Drama des Sozialismus*. Deutsche Literatur – Studien und Quellen 20. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015.
- Wiegand, Georg. *Heiner Müller*. Munich: C. H. Beck Verlag, 1981.
- . *Zwischen Auftrag und Verrat: Werk und Ästhetik Heiner Müllers*. Frankfurt: Lang, 1984.
- Zinserling, Gerhard. *Das klassische Altertum in der sozialistischen Kultur*. Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Friedrich Schiller Universität Jena 18.4 (1969).
- Zöllner, Mara. "Volksbühne: Die 'Troerinnen' von Matthias Braun." In *Theater der Zeit* June 16 (1961).

## SUMMARY

### *Ancient Drama and Reception of Antiquity in the Theatre and Drama of the German Democratic Republic (GDR)*

Theatre in the German Democratic Republic was an essential part of the state propaganda machine and was strictly controlled by the cultural bureaucracy and by the party. Until the early sixties, ancient plays were rarely staged. In the sixties, classical Greek drama became officially recognised as part of cultural heritage. Directors free to stage the great classical playwrights selected ancient plays, on one hand, to escape the grim socialist reality, on the other to criticise it using various forms of Aesopian language. Two important dramatists and three examples of plays are presented and discussed: an adaptation of an Aristophanic comedy (Peter Hack's adaptation of Aristophanes' *Peace* at the Deutsche Theater in Berlin in 1962), a play based on a Sophoclean tragedy (Heiner Müller's *Philoktet*, published in 1965, staged only in 1977), and a short didactic play (*Lehrstück*) based on Roman history (Heiner Müller's *Der Horatier*, written in 1968, staged in 1973 in Hamburg in West Germany, and in the GDR only in 1988). At the end there is a brief look at a production of Aeschylus *Seven against Thebes* at the BE in 1969.

## POVZETEK

### Antična dramatika in recepcija antike v gledališču in dramatiki Nemške demokratične republike (NDR)

Gledališče je bilo v Nemški demokratični republiki pomemben del državnega propagandnega stroja ter pod strogim nadzorom kulturne birokracije in partije. Do začetka šestdesetih let so bile uprizoritve antičnih dram redke. V šestdesetih letih je klasična grška drama postala uradno priznan del kulturne dediščine. Režiserji so lahko svobodno uprizarjali gledališke klasike in antične drame so po eni strani izbirali zato, da bi se izognili mračni socialistični realnosti, po drugi pa zato, da so to realnost lahko kritizirali z uporabo različnih oblik ezopskega jezika. Članek predstavi in analizira dva pomembna dramatika in tri primere dram: najprej adaptacijo Aristofanove komedije (Petra Hacka in njegovo adaptacijo Aristofanovega *Miru* na odru gledališča Deutsche Theater v Berlinu leta 1962), nato dramo, zasnovano na Sofoklovi tragediji (*Filoktet* Heinerja Müllerja, objavljen leta 1965, uprizorjen šele leta 1977) in slednjič kratko didaktično igro (*Lehrstück*), ki temelji na rimski zgodovini (dramo *Der Horatier* Heinerja Müllerja, napisano leta 1968, uprizorjeno leta 1973 v Hamburgu v Zahodni Nemčiji in šele leta 1988 v NDR). V zadnjem delu obravnava uprizoritev Ajshilove *Sedmerice proti Tebam* v BE leta 1969.