

# *The Labourers of Herakles* by Tony Harrison

The Workshop Theatre, University of Leeds, 11<sup>th</sup> November 2017

Pre-performance talk: DR CRAIG HANNAWAY

**Director:** DR GEORGE RODOSTHENOUS (PCI, University of Leeds)

**Cast:**

EDWARD ANDREWS

LUKE PROWSE BALDWIN

OLIVER HARRISON

GEORGE HOWARD

GEORGE HUNT

CHARLIE NORBURN

**THE LABOURERS OF HERAKLES**

Tony Harrison wrote *The Labourers of Herakles* in 1995 as an entry at the Eighth International Meeting on Ancient Greek Drama at Delphi, Greece. It was a co-production of the European Cultural Centre of Delphi and the National Theatre Studio, and was staged on 23<sup>rd</sup> August 1995 in a specially (half-)constructed venue: the building site that was designated as the new theatre for the European Cultural Centre of Delphi. The production was sponsored, appropriately, by the Herakles General Cement Company of Greece, which was involved in the building project, and whose silo, cement mixers and bags played an important part in the performance, as you will see from the projections behind the stage. Because of the specially constructed site and other location-specific and time-specific aspects, the play has only been staged at its original performance in Delphi; a reconstruction in an ordinary, completed theatre would, in several important ways, inevitably miss the mark, which is why this staged reading is unique, and also why it does not attempt an impossible full production.

The all-male cast are all at times Labourers (of the Herakles cement company), working on the construction site for the new theatre in 1995, but one Labourer also assumes the club and lion-skin of Herakles (better known in the Latinised form Hercules), and the others become Greek and Persian soldiers or Women of Miletos. The cement mixers served as a ‘chorus of women’, and also as drums. The play uses the mad frenzy of Herakles, in which he murdered his own children, as a means of exploring the horrors of war. Herakles as the greatest hero, and thus an emblem of manhood, also invites us to question the value of traditional models of masculinity (a recurring theme of Harrison’s work). This play foregrounds the traditional roles of men and women in war, and in violence generally—the perpetrators and the dead, and those left to lament their losses—through the familial tragedy of Herakles, but also through the Women of Miletos.

**PHRYNICHOS AND MILETOS**

Miletos, an Athenian colony in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), was sacked by the Persians suppressing the Ionian revolt (499-493 BCE) by Greek cities of Asia Minor. They slaughtered almost the entire male population, and enslaved the women and children. The Athenian tragedian Phrynichos wrote *The Capture of Miletos*—referred to in Harrison’s play by its Greek title *Halosis Miletou*—shortly afterwards. If the historian Herodotus is to be believed, the play was too distressing for the Athenian audience, moving them to tears, and causing them to fine

him “for reminding them of familiar misfortunes”, and to ban future performances. There is also a tradition, reported in the Byzantine encyclopaedia the Suda, that Phrynichos was the first tragedian to introduce female characters onto the Athenian stage (played by male actors, as with all classical drama). Harrison uses these traditions to great effect in *Labourers*, having the all-male cast of *Labourers* don female masks and adopt ‘feminine’ voices to become Women of Miletos.

The play contains, in the original Greek, all the remaining fragments of Phrynichos’ tragedies—and the sole surviving fragment by a comic playwright of the same name, wrongly attributed to the tragic Phrynichos in printed editions.

### **THE BOSNIAN CONFLICT AND HARRISON THE WAR CORRESPONDENT**

The play was written while the Bosnian War (1992-1995) dominated the international news with reports and images of ethnic cleansing, concentration camps, mass slaughter of men and boys, and the systematic use of rape of women and girls (sexual enslavement) as a weapon of war. It is clear from Harrison’s notebooks for *Labourers*, held in the Brotherton library, that these images had a great effect on him during the writing process: cuttings from newspapers, from whole stories to series of images, fill the pages of the notebooks, with the poet’s own and other commentators’ parallels between the current and historical conflicts highlighted. Certain parallels between the fall of Miletos and the dominant contemporary stories of war are put to powerful effect in the play, alongside the more universal themes of human conflict and suffering of which these particular ancient and modern cases are also examples. The proximity of the theatre at Delphi to the theatre of war is another connection that Harrison exploits, having the cast “turn their heads North-West towards former Yugoslavia”, to quote the published stage directions.

Harrison did not know, while he was writing the play, that he would be commissioned by the *Guardian* to go to Bosnia almost as soon as he had seen *Labourers* performed at Delphi, to send them poems about what he saw and experienced there. But this play, as well as the archive materials from the time of its composition, together form the backdrop to his Bosnian war poems.

OWEN HODKINSON

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The organisers are very grateful to the following:

TONY HARRISON, for permission to stage the play. Text © Tony Harrison 1996. (Available in *Tony Harrison: Plays 3*, Faber and Faber 1996)

VICKI HALLAM, for permission to use her photographs of the original Delphi performance as projections. Images © Vicki Hallam

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, LEEDS, especially Sarah Prescott, for assistance with locating and digitising the images.

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