

## OPERANT: ...(*IPHIGENIA*) AT BERKELEY

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Speaking by phone to a critic several weeks before the premiere of ...(*Iphigenia*), director Lileana Blain-Cruz announced: ‘esperanza challenges the absurdity of this myth... Men must kill a young woman so they can go to war. Why repeat what does not work? What does it feel like to be a young woman thrust into this absurd story?’<sup>1</sup> In fact, the Wayne Shorter-esperanza spalding production exaggerates the myth’s absurdity, minimizing the pain of Agamemnon and flattening the familial calamity at the heart of Euripides’ play until it becomes a conflict between aggressive men and suffering women. It is easy to judge these toxic male warriors with their Wagnerian helmets and hints of white nationalism. It is also easy for the female members of the audience to identify with Iphigenia, and with the series of Iphigenias whom the warriors put to death. Yet, at our moment, Shorter and spalding’s reimagining of a myth about the sacrifice of a virgin to power a fleet invites us to consider our own implication in an urgent calamity, one in which we are both warrior and virgin.

Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis*, very obviously, questions the cost of war. The idea that the high-status life of the warrior is the only one worth living is tested and broken by the play’s events. Euripides’ Agamemnon presents a fundamental truth about the Greek culture of the time when he describes the enormous machinery of war that demands to be oiled. Watching ...(*Iphigenia*)’s recklessly brutal warriors, it is easy to forget that we have our own machinery of war that also demands to be oiled at great expense. However, the American military industrial complex is not the only machinery that calls for oil. Our whole lives require it. Our modern version of the high-status life requires enormous and ongoing destruction. From this uncomfortable perspective, the warriors who demand a virgin-powered wind to fuel their ships are versions of us, despoiling vulnerable environments and communities for fossil fuels.

Our unrelenting complicity in this damage complicates any comfortable relation we might have with the suffering characters of the opera. If we might identify with Iphigenia, sheltering in a sense of shared oppression, her association with a natural world that has been despoiled and continues to be despoiled suggests our similarity to the warriors responsible for her death. Our observation of the swift slaughter of a series of Iphigenias in the first act is analogous to our observation of the rapidity and ease of environmental depredation. The cycle repeats itself as we watch, uncomfortable but passive.

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1. Saccocia (2021).

For Frankfurt School theorists, repetition is central to the structure and role of myth. Whereas Enlightenment philosophers had criticized mythical thinking as an attempt to represent a natural world that is not yet understood and mastered, for Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer the mastery of nature under capitalism prompts a new kind of myth, a narrative of progress that conceals its brutality: ‘With the spread of the bourgeois commodity economy the dark horizon of myth is illuminated by the sun of calculating reason, beneath whose icy rays the seeds of the new barbarism are germinating. Under the compulsion of power, human labor has always led away from myth and, under power, has always fallen back under its spell.’<sup>2</sup> If in premodern times people had explained the events of their world with narratives of wayward divine will, under capitalism a new kind of primal history circulates, characterized by unthinking passivity. According to Walter Benjamin, “‘Eternal return’ is the *fundamental* form of the *urgeschichtlichen*, mythic consciousness. (Mythic because it does not reflect.)”<sup>3</sup> He offers Tantalus, Sisyphus, and the Danaides as examples of doomed repetition and quotes Karl Marx’s invocation of myth to figure the victims of modernity: ‘The miserable routine of endless drudgery and toil in which the same mechanical process is repeated over and over again is like the labor of Sisyphus. The burden of labor, like the rock, always keeps falling back on the worn-out laborer.’<sup>4</sup> Whereas for Marx and the Frankfurt School theorists the key site and victim of capitalist modernity’s damage were the metropolis and the factory worker, in our moment they are the entire globe and all of its inhabitants, most urgently those of the Global South.

Yet in ...(*Iphigenia*) Shorter and spalding make possible the disruption of a ‘perpetual relapse into the always-the-same.’<sup>5</sup> This disruption begins with their resistance to institutional norms. Critic Nate Chinen observes that ‘The approach taken by the ...(*Iphigenia*) team, including producer Jeff Tang and director Lileana Blain-Cruz, has been to proceed as if operatic institutions are beside the point.’<sup>6</sup> In his interview with Chinen, Shorter celebrates the collaborative liberty enjoyed by the writers of early operas: “‘The first people were not limited,’” Shorter says... “That’s how opera grew. It came out of the desire to play together.”<sup>7</sup> spalding set up the production company Real Magic with Jeff Tang in order to maximize this collaborative play, rejecting the usual order of production in which funds are raised, the libretto is written, the score is composed, and so on. This disruption of the status quo extends through their conception of ...(*Iphigenia*) as an opera with jazz elements. This is signaled most obviously in the second and third acts when the Shorter jazz trio play onstage

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2. Horkheimer and Adorno (2020), 25.

3. Benjamin (2002), 119.

4. Benjamin (2002), 840, 106.

5. This is the term that Wolin (1986), 211, employs for capitalist modernity’s mythic structure.

6. Chinen (2021).

7. Chinen (2021).

beside the singers. The improvisatory nature of jazz informs spalding's refusal to script the ending, her desire that it 'be co-devised by the people who are actually in the room bringing the story through their bodies in real time instead.'<sup>8</sup>

I want to suggest that this co-creative physical presence potentially includes the bodies of the people in the auditorium. Improvising jazz performers, after all, respond not only to the active presences of other musicians on the stage but also to the responses of their audience members. This active audience response is thematized in spalding's 2018 album *12 Little Spells*, which she composed as a somatic intervention. While its individual songs each work on a specific body part, the titles of its last nine tracks, when read together, announce the mobilization of a collective body: 'Now Know (solar portal) / All Limbs Are (arms) / Ready to Rise (legs) / Dancing The Animal (mind) / With Others (ears) / Lest We Forget (blood) / How To (hair) / Move Many (joints) / Ways Together (shoulders).'9 Iphigenia of the Open Tense's repetitions, 'And I, And I, And I', in the second act might be read as an attempt to articulate an independent self but this stammering is better understood as the faltering of the protagonist as bearer of meaning or instigator of action, prompting the emergence of a new, collective agent.

...(*Iphigenia*)'s greatest affront to the conventions of opera is thus its invitation to its audience to abandon the attitude of passive reception. This activation of spectators is embodied most explicitly by the figure of the Usher, who heckles loudly and discordantly in a contemporary idiom from the auditorium. In Euripides' play, Clytemnestra expresses dissatisfaction when she is told that Iphigenia has been taken by the gods and made immortal, as she has no evidence that her daughter is not merely dead. ...(*Iphigenia*) builds on this ambiguity. As the Usher, also called Clytemnestra, expresses outrage and incredulity at the advent of yet another slaughter, we too might heckle, and with more hope. After the performance at Zellerbach Hall at Berkeley, I asked an audience member what she thought of the ending, and she exclaimed 'Why couldn't she just grab the knife and stab Agamemnon with it?' She could, if the audience supported her. To intervene in the ending of the opera, to abandon our passivity in its open tense, it would not have been necessary to rush the stage but only to respond, to move, to vocalize, to join in.

A venue such as the Zellerbach manifests the powerfully restrictive conventions that Shorter argues lend force to new creations: 'Wayne always says that you can't get mad at those forces of resistance that surround the creative art, because that resistance is exactly what we need to fly', spalding says. 'And he always uses this metaphor of a plane needing drag as much as it needs lift. So, actually, I guess if there were no restrictions or forces of rigidity working on the process of this, it wouldn't truly be in spirit with Wayne's philosophy.'10

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8. Walecki (2021).

9. spalding (2018).

10. Chinen (2021).

Opera's taboo on any response other than applause, its atomization of its audience into passive individuals, provides compelling forces of resistance against which an active and critical community might be formed.

...(Iphigenia) is thus poised to develop Richard Wagner's concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the 'total work of art' that involves music, libretto, sets, costumes, and movement. For Wagner, the self-sacrifice of the individual, represented thematically and repeated through the mode of collaborative theatrical work, is necessary for the *Gesamtkunstwerk's* transcendence of the divisions of modern society and its establishment of a utopian collective social formation.<sup>11</sup> If Wagner intended the total work of art to undo the separation between performers and audience, Shorter and Spalding's jazz-infused opera is incomplete without its audience's participation.

...(Iphigenia) refuses the conventions of opera to activate its potential at a time of collective culpability and collective need. This potential was characterized powerfully by Spalding in a panel discussion at Berkeley the day before the Zellerbach performance: 'Opera is one of the most powerful and profound things a human body can do, besides giving birth. It is because of this power that it has become contained by institutions, by corporations etc. who have no direct relationship to the undomesticated and the sacred and want to contain those forces.'<sup>12</sup> ...(Iphigenia) offers us a means of cultivating an alternative relationship to the human and nonhuman world. To attend it once may not be enough to join in its improvisatory assemblage of text, sounds, voices, instruments, costumes, sets, lighting, and bodies. For the opera's transformative promise to be realized, in the disruption of the return of the same and the invention a future together, ...(Iphigenia) may need to be repeated.

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11. Wagner (1993), 69–214.

12. Cal Performances and The Black Studies Collaboratory (2022).