

The World as Stage —

Examining *σκηνή* & The Greco-Roman Legacy of *theatrum mundi* for Pandemic Theatre

To an art form that is already inherently ephemeral, the coronavirus pandemic has taken away one of the modern theatre's core foundations, namely, the physical, indoor stage. As Broadway and virtually all other major venues have remained closed, “Zoom theatre” and experimental socially-distanced outdoor performances have tried to fill the void. What, if anything, does the Greco-Roman theatre have to offer us, both in practice and philosophy, on creating theatre in such a challenging environment without an indoor stage?

In practice, I argue that the Greco-Roman theatre offers us a way of faithfully reclaiming the outdoors as primary acting space and of re-imagining the role of mask-wearing in dramatic expression. Of particular discussion is re-examining the role of outdoor theatre architecture in an “open-air” ancient society and play production and how masks once amplified both acoustics and the ancient dramaturgical ideals of character development (Arnott 1989). Philosophically, I argue for the semantic development of *σκηνή* as associated with transitoriness from its earliest uses in both tragedy and epigrammatic literature as a framework for pandemic theatre to re-imagine sympathetic ancient production values.

In tragedy, I analyze the use and significance of *σκηναῖς τροχηλάτοισιν* (1000) in Aeschylus's *Persians* as one of the earliest theatrical grounds for the use of *σκηνή* in developing the *theatrum mundi* trope. In epigrammatic literature, I juxtapose an early epigram attributed to Democritus (Diels 1959) with a later epigram from the Egyptian Palladas (LCL 85):

Ο κόσμος σκηνή, ο βίος πάροδος. Ἦλθες, εἶδες, ἀπήλθες.

- Democritus (attributed), DK 68 B 115.84

Σκηνὴ πᾶς ὁ βίος καὶ παίγνιον· ἢ μάθε παίζειν,
τὴν σπουδὴν μεταθείς, ἢ φέρε τὰς ὀδύνας.

- Palladas, *Greek Anthology* IV.10.72

The development of *σκηνή* and the use of transitory language particular to the *theatrum mundi* trope expressed in these epigrams is analyzed in light of current pandemic theatre dramaturgy. This is bookended by comparing the significance of *σκηνή* as the physical, theatrical backdrop architecture to its literary association with transitoriness, explaining how the semantic range expanded from a literal tent that is set up and moved again to a static structure of scenery in the evolution of theatre architecture (Michaelis 1971).

I situate the practical and philosophical implications from the textual study of *σκηνή* and the Greco-Roman discussion of the *theatrum mundi* within my own experience of transferring a COVID-disrupted indoor university production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* to the outdoors for a reworked filming. With the famous lines, "*All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players,*" this play demonstrates Shakespeare's formulation of the inherited Greco-Roman *theatrum mundi* trope, and gives a modern inter-text to both the tragic and epigrammatic literature analyzed (Bates 2019). I conclude by discussing the significance of this intertextuality for pandemic theatre, and how the Greco-Roman meta-theatrical inheritance influenced my own dramatic process of taking the once indoor "stage" to the outdoor "world." It is my intention to promote further dialogue between both performers and classicists about how looking to Greco-Roman theatre practice and philosophy can help us to re-think how we produce authentic, modern theatre in a time where "all the world" has truly become *the stage*.

Bibliography

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