LOOKING AT LYSISTRATA

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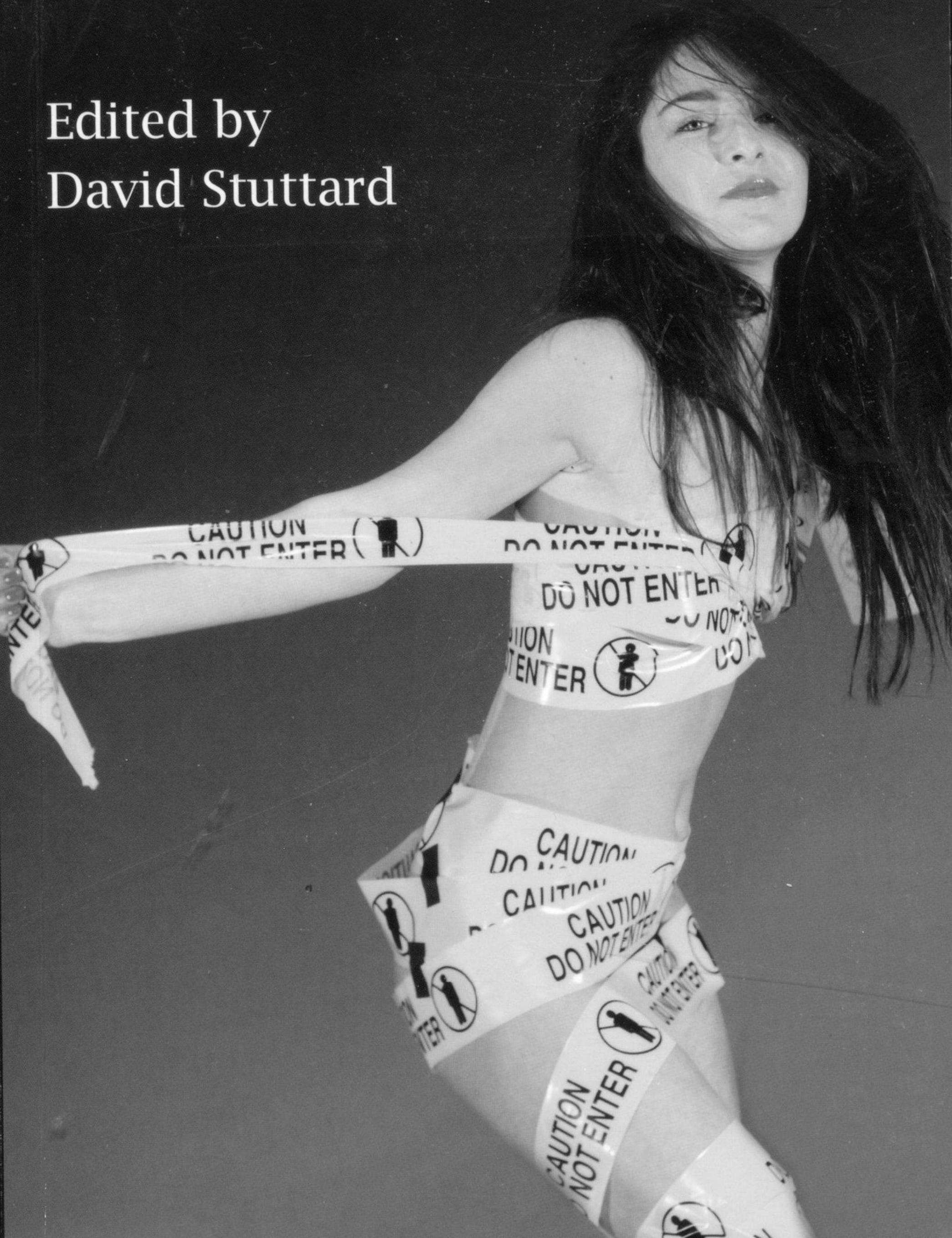

8

Lysistratas on the Modern Stage

Lorna Hardwick

The performance history of *Lysistrata* in the last hundred years offers us a map of shifting attitudes to the relationships between politics and gender and between these and the aesthetics of theatre. In that respect, whatever the particular settings, the translations, versions and adaptations engage directly with Aristophanes' relationship to the theatrical, social and political environment of his own times. In the West, the play has been by far the most frequently performed Aristophanic comedy.

In the early twentieth century, productions and adaptations of *Lysistrata* were important in addressing women's struggle to obtain a social and political voice and in challenging the prurience that had marginalised the play. The play also provided a stimulus to aesthetic experiments in theatrical modernism, for example in Max Reinhardt's Berlin production of 1908 and the 1923 version directed for the Moscow Art Theatre's Musical Studio by Nemirovich-Danchenko inspired by the October Revolution of 1917 (Kotzamani 2005). These early twentieth-century productions established associations between the play's focus on city life and politics and the contemporary idealisation of novelty and politically engaged theatre. They exploited the association between the setting in the city of Athens, the Acropolis and the (sometimes fuzzy) construction of links with modern democratic values.

There are, however, some more socially conservative aspects present in an earlier example of a 'revolutionary' production of the play. François-Benoît Hoffmann's *Lisitrata* aroused the wrath of the censors in 1801-2. Staged in France during the

negotiations for the peace treaty of Amiens, the play was described as 'a Comedy in one act and in prose, mixed with satirical songs and imitating Aristophanes' play: its performances have been suspended by Order' (Orfanos 2007, 106). Interestingly, in this particular adaptation the women were pretty feeble. They abandoned their sex-strike and gave up the peace-making initiative to men. The author re-domesticated the women and probably fell foul of Napoleon's censors because of the play's irreverent treatment of war. The incident demonstrates the sometimes uneasy balance between viewing the play as a comment on war and as a comment on women's voices in the political process. It also raises questions about the extent to which the two are thought either to work together or at least to be compatible.

The key aspects of modern responses to Aristophanes are at the intersections between the logical and the fantastic (see James Robson and Alan Beale in this volume) and between gender and the political. This raises issues about how social groups are represented and in particular about the degree of reconciliation between theatrical exploitation of the comic potential of stereotypes and a more naturalistic representation of the possibilities and limits of social action. In Aristophanes, the ways in which the women's actions are represented point up their incongruity in the 'real' environment at Athens and play with the relationship between gender assumptions and the authority of political judgements and actions. Aristophanes was able to explore contentious issues concerning the Peloponnesian War of 431-404 BC by situating these in alignment with a conception of women's self-empowerment that was, and would be seen to be, impossible. In contrast, in the twentieth- and the early twenty-first centuries, the cultural contexts of Western Europe and the United States have gradually conceded some kind of political role to women, ranging from the franchise to active participation as politicians and opinion-makers (although at the time of writing in spring 2008 the sexist and misogynistic language used by mainstream media and commentators on both sides of the Atlantic to attack and trivialise Senator Hillary Clinton's bid to become the Democratic candidate in the US Presidential election should caution against complacency in this respect).

Contemporary productions have sometimes elided gender and anti-war themes, as in Tony Harrison's *The Common Chorus* (1988/1992), in which the play was set in the context of the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp protests against the stationing of US missiles in the UK. However, the most prominent recent exploration of the play's potential for consciousness-raising has been in the Lysistrata Project of 2003. This was a world-wide initiative organised to protest against the imminent invasion of Iraq by the United States-led coalition, which included the UK and Australia. The Project involved over a thousand co-ordinated readings from *Lysistrata*, held all over the world on 3 March 2003.

The project was initiated and organised by two New York-based actors, Kathryn Blume and Sharron Bower. At a cost of $35 dollars to set up the server space they used the internet to spread information. The letter posted on their website invited people to take on responsibility for trying to avert war by participating in 'a theatrical act of dissent'. The wording of the letter appealed directly to people's emotions and sense of political impotence:

> Are you frustrated by the build up to war? Do you fell as if there isn't something you can do? Well. Here's something you CAN do. Do a reading of *Lysistrata* on March 3 and be part of the Lysistrata Project.

The initiative mobilised over 300,000 people who participated in readings in fifty-nine countries (which was documented by its own website). The whole operation took a little over six weeks to set up. It brought together the communication and mobilisation capacity of the internet and the reputation of *Lysistrata* as a play that was not only one of protest and transgression but also one in which activists could express their views and seek to bring about change (in that respect they did not succeed in averting the war; they did mobilise opinion).

There was a wide variety of readings and creative responses. These ranged from epic drama to documentary theatre to multimedia versions to storytelling. In London, actors read a version in front of the Houses of Parliament. They wore blindfolds

which they tore off and waved, becoming what they called 'a chorus of disapproval'. In New York, at Grand Central Station, a storyteller performed a children's version which began with the words: 'In the very old days in ancient Greece, women didn't used to do the same jobs as men did. Women swept and dusted and tidied their houses ... but men knew nothing else but making war.' These examples are included in the account written by the academic and dramaturge Marina Kotzamani for the *Performing Arts Journal* (*PAJ*). She also records that in Holland (Hilversum) a radio documentary combined excerpts from Aristophanes with interviews with politicians and reports from war zones, while in Israel storytellers were organised to go out into communities and tell the story of Lysistrata in as many places as possible.

In Greece itself there was an interesting contrast between two readings that took place in Athens and in Patras. The Athens reading took place on the Pnyx, on the south-eastern slope of the Acropolis and the site of the ancient Athenian *ekklesia* (assembly). The reading aimed to celebrate democracy and to involve the city in general – passers-by and tourists as well as those who watched televised excerpts. There was a carnival atmosphere with participants costumed in long wigs, huge breasts and *phalloi* that replicated the ancient performance tradition. The reading also proclaimed the confidence of modern women in occupying and using a public space that in ancient Athens was the territory of men.

The Patras reading was very different in participants and in tone. It used the neoclassical ruins of an old marketplace in the centre of the city. This site was being used as a social centre by Kurdish political refugees, and the *Lysistrata* reading (which was organised by Panos Kouros, an academic at the School of Architecture in the city) involved about fifty people, including male refugees and architecture students. Part of the event took place in candlelight after a power cut. Kouros recounted how 'we could see our shadows in the white tent and we could feel more the voices. This created a very strong feeling of humanity, and a sense of sharing the same hopes and fears. We spoke in ancient Greek (text), modern Greek (text and dialogues), some English and Kurdish (through spontaneous translations). We

also talked a lot with our eyes, our movement and our body. We drank tea' (quoted in Kotzamani, *Theater* 36.2, p. 105). As a protest against the war in Iraq this was an ambivalent reading because the Kurds were refugees from Saddam Hussein's regime and hoped that his overthrow would enable them to return. Yet they also (presciently as it turned out) recognised the war as involving US expansion and aggression.

Most of the readings in the Lysistrata Project took place in the West. However, some Arabic countries bordering the Mediterranean also took part, and Marina Kotzamani subsequently used this as a springboard for an imaginative exploration of the play's potential as a catalyst in non-Western cultures. In 2004 she organised a project in which she invited Arab theatre practitioners, playwrights and theorists to outline in writing how they would stage *Lysistrata* in their own countries. She presented and discussed the results at a conference in Morocco in 2005 and published an article in *PAJ* (from which the quotations subsequently used in this discussion are taken).

Most of the respondents were male and were well-established theatre professionals. Responses seemed to follow the trend set by the 2003 Lysistrata Project in that they framed the play in a global context and examined critically the relationship between autocracy, imperialism and manipulation of the media. Most responses doubted that the war between Athenians and Spartans portrayed in Aristophanes' play provided an adequate basis for probing the complexities of war in today's world. Several contributors pointed out that the Peloponnesian War was fought between states who shared a common framework of ethnicity, religious practices, culture and values. It was, as Hazem Azmy put it, 'an internecine war'.

Some of the reasons given for not accepting the Aristophanic situation as a viable model for contemporary theatre are revealing of both ancient and modern approaches. For instance, Khaled El Sawy, the Egyptian playwright and director, saw problems about who could be seen to take a peace initiative. If the Athenian women were identified with Arab women this could be interpreted as having the weaker party sue for peace ('To preach a message of peace to today's Arab audiences is tantamount to instructing the victims to accept sheepishly the

dictates of their arrogant oppressors'). He therefore cast the women seeking peace as American rather than Arab and set the play in the US using a performance idiom based on the rock operas of the 1970s. His approach mixed the light-hearted conventions of the musical with tragic-comedy, parody and the grotesque in order to create a powerful political theatre. He used the Aristophanic concept of the double Chorus to express the alternative voices of the city. A sexy Chorus of Hollywood blondes co-existed with a more restrained chorus that included African-Americans and provided links to a diverse audience. However, the outcome to his visualisation of the play was deeply pessimistic – the conclusion of peace was immediately followed by sirens and explosions signalling the continuation of war and the limits of popular activism in contemporary situations. The Palestinian director George Ibrahim took these doubts further, saying that he could not use *Lysistrata* to address the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians because he considered there were crucial differences between the ancient and modern situations (such as Israeli army occupation of Palestinian territory and guerrilla resistance).

Most of the responders saw Aristophanes' play as a people's play rather than as an exploration of the possibilities of women's action. However, two of the respondents did express interest in linking gender to the opposition between war and peace. They produced synopses that were critical of patriarchal systems and aggressive masculinity and that associated women with a more genuine desire for peace. Ghada Amer (a visual artist originally from Cairo and now based in New York) wished to examine the role of the female chorus on a number of levels. She wanted this chorus to be played by men in order to demonstrate that women in a patriarchal society do not have self-possession. She imagined the (male) actors in the female chorus as wearing hoods to present the domination of men over women as that of minds over bodies. The image also had more literal links with the abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US guards at the Abu Ghraib prison. This is a useful reminder of the way in which costume and somatic language can create resonances that cross cultures as well as time-spans.

One of the respondents, the celebrated Egyptian film director and playwright Lenin El-Ramly, used the initiative as inspiration for writing a full-length play based on *Lysistrata*. His play, *Salam El-Nisaa* (*A Peace of Women*) was produced in Cairo in December 2004 and led to considerable discussion in the Egyptian press. It is now being translated in English by Hazem Azmy under the editorial supervision of Professor Marvin Carlson at CUNY (extracts available at http://www.wordswithoutborders.org). El-Ramly described his motivation as 'initially for no other purpose except to see how the censor would react to it' (El-Ramly 2005a, 175). This response is linked, perhaps, to his view that it was not coincidence 'that the art of theatre should be born in the lap of Athenian democracy ... the essence of all drama is inner conflict, democracy being the recognition of this conflict within the one society'. He also comments on how frequently that kind of conflict is 'conveniently and manipulatively [turned] into an external one with a national dimension' (El-Ramly 2005b). His comment provides a timely warning about the complexities involved in assessing any appropriation of Greek drama.

El-Ramly's play was set in Baghdad shortly before the US-led invasion, and the Chorus of Old Men in Aristophanes was replaced with a Chorus of Iraqi anti-riot police. The Iraqi Lysistrata allied herself with American and other Western women activists and occupied the Ministry of Petroleum. However, in contrast to the Aristophanes, the Iraqi and American officials made an alliance against the transgressive women, who in turn became progressively more divided by their different cultural and moral value systems. In his discussion of the play (El-Ramly 2005a, 2005b), El-Ramly also points out that he had to develop techniques for communicating Aristophanes' use of sexual puns and jokes. Previous translations of the play into Arabic had bowdlerised some of these passages. El-Ramly found that by using *Fus'ha* (Modern Standard Arabic) for the first time in his career he could get round some of these problems since, he says, *Fus'ha* has an abstract quality that allows it to suggest meaning with explicit statement. This is in contrast to the everyday *Ammega* (Egyptian Colloquial Arabic) into which the audience would mentally 'translate' the play-

text. Thus he created a kind of internal cultural movement in the spectators' minds.

El-Ramly had a further problem in staging his play, since his concept did not fit the requirements of either the commercial or the state-run theatres. He obtained funding from the Greek community in Egypt and directed the play himself with an amateur cast. It was staged in the open-air theatre of the Opera House. He commented wryly, 'As I knew at the time, few Egyptian amateur actresses were indeed ready to flash many parts of their bodies on stage, especially as demanded by the roles of the Western women. It then occurred to me to get around the problem by re-invoking one of the oldest traditions of ancient Greek theatre: to cast men in some of the female roles'. This approach resulted in some criticism. According to El-Ramly, 'some critics and intellectuals complained that in showing the Western female activists in such a burlesque manner and clad in semi-nude dresses I was, in effect, confirming the stereotype of the licentious West already strong in the Egyptian spectator's imagination' (El-Ramly 2005a, 2005b). El-Ramly delights in overturning narrow interpretations and exposing limited ideologies, commenting that it was a pity that the (justified) criticism of the invasion of Iraq had not been accompanied by an equally strenuous denunciation of the practices of Saddam's regime. Ironically, since the execution of Saddam the play has not been restaged and its impact on spectators in the Arab world (and elsewhere) would probably be coloured by changes in attitude to Sadaam in the light of subsequent events in Iraq.

The Egyptian academic and theatre critic for *Al Ahram*, Professor Nehad Selaiha, who was initially critical of Koztamani's *Lysistrata* writing project as she thought it underestimated the existing substantial and close connection between theatre and contemporary politics in the Arabic theatre of the Mediterranean region, has written a detailed account of the 2004 production. She describes how the play began with a 'deceptively light-hearted choral prologue (on the model of the Greek *parabasis*), in which the Chorus of men and women, dressed in an approximation of the ancient Greek style ... warn us that they are all amateurs, with no stars in the case, tell us that the play is a disputatious parody of *Lysistrata*, deny that it

has any political message and disclaim any responsibility for it should it fail to please us'.

Then the mood changes and the play includes a new scene in which a woman sits alone, silently reading a letter while extracts from the work of the canonical Iraqi poet Abdel Wahab El-Bayati are sung to represent what she is reading – a nostalgic love letter from her husband who has fled from the terror of Saddam's regime. She is Labiba (the wise one) and the modern counterpart of Lysistrata. Subsequently the play follows Aristophanes' play quite closely for two-thirds of its length. Only in the final third does it veer away from the Aristophanic formula and address the present. The peace advocates' alliance fragments. The Western women leave; the Iraqi women are sent back to the traditional private spheres of the home; the chaste virgin prepares to blow herself up, calling this her wedding night. The soundscape of sirens, explosions and aircraft noise takes over.

Selaiha characterises El Ramly's production as 'a savagely ironic, intertextual engagement with Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* across the gap of centuries, where the scene becomes Baghdad and the time immediately before the American invasion. In this new setting, the recalcitrant ideological issues underpinning the conflict between a predominately Muslim Arab world and a predominately Christian West are ruthlessly bared and made to destroy the solidarity of women ... [The play] depicts a bereaved nation, exhausted by the war with Iran, disgusted with the massacre of the Kurds in the north, straining under the weight of an oppressive, dictatorial military regime, wearied and depleted by the economic sanctions, and trembling at the prospect of yet another devastating war and more destruction. The Hellenic plot of Athenian, Spartan, Corinthian and Boiotian women to stop the war by staging a sex-strike in their respective territories is replayed by Iraqi and Western women from the States, Britain, France and Germany.'

El-Ramly has recounted the reaction of one Western long-term resident in Egypt: 'This time you have not left anyone unscathed: the East and the West alike' (El-Ramly 2005a, 177). He sees comedy as 'an exemplary way of transcending all differences ... laughter arises out of the sincere depiction of truth,

albeit through the use of the imagined and the improbable'. Comedy can also be closely related to tragedy – 'after all, tragedy is but the dark canvas against which the entire colours of comedy shine and disperse'. The Lysistrata Project, Kotzamani's project with Arab writers and El-Ramly's play and its critical reception bring this relationship between tragedy and comedy into an agonising tension.

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I owe special thanks to Hazem Azmy and Marina Kotzamani for their generosity in providing information and discussion.