CHAPTER 9

Pop Music Adaptations of Aeschylus' Plays: What Kind of Rock was Prometheus Fastened to?

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9.1 Introduction

One manner in which the cultural divide between 5th century Athens and contemporary America has been bridged within production/adaptation is through the use of music. Adaptations shape audience perceptions of Greek tragedy by filtering it through the elements and tropes of the music employed in the adaptation. Elsewhere in this volume, Sarah Brown Ferrario and Dana L. Munteanu in separate chapters explore Aeschylus adapted as opera, itself until recently a popular form, the latter arguing that Aeschylean adaptation changed as musical tastes changed. A growing trend for the past three decades has been the appropriation of popular music styles into productions of classical plays. While Shakespeare has dominated the trend, Greek tragedy in general and the plays of Aeschylus in particular have not been immune, with several adaptations using pop music (rock, hip hop, etc.) to translate not only the Greek tragic experience but to shape the reception of Aeschylus by contemporary American audiences.

Pop music-mediated productions of Aeschylus reinscribe the plays using a new series of referents, Americanizing the plays and blending them with elements of youth culture and pop culture. After examining the double reception of pop music adaptations of Aeschylus' dramas for performance, I will consider the appropriation/adaptation of four kinds of pop music into four productions of Aeschylus' plays: Will Power's *The Seven*, (a hip-hop "ad-raptation" of *Seven Against Thebes*, developed between 2001 and 2008), Dizzy Miss Lizzie's bluegrass/country-rock version of *The Oresteia*, performed in 2009, the American Repertory Theatre's 2011 rock production of *Prometheus Bound*, and the Troubadours' 2014 *Abbamemnon*, which filtered the first play of *The Oresteia* through disco culture in general and the music of Swedish pop group ABBA specifically, each of which approaches the plays of Aeschylus in a different way in order to shape the reception of the original through pop music.

I find myself in agreement with Lorna Hardwick who, elsewhere in this volume states, "Symbolic rewriting may enhance rather than destroy the aesthetic and political agency of trauma." I would further argue that the musical styles

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employed in adaptation bring their own history of narrative of trauma as well as a mechanism for coping with and healing trauma. Hip-hop engages urban trauma, bluegrass was born out of the hardscrabble existence in Appalachia and its songs explore the trauma caused by the railroad, lost or unrequited love, and the challenges of farming and mining, while rock and roll, a music of youth and rebellion, could not exist without traumatic narrative. The music used to adapt Aeschylus frequently reshapes the original play's trauma by serving as a vehicle for making that trauma accessible to contemporary audiences, and in doing so, gives these plays agency in the present.

I thus must disagree somewhat that adaptation is a trauma to the original text. Trauma is an injury caused by external force, whether physical trauma or emotional trauma. Yet in the case of adaptation the original text remains unharmed, existing side by side with the adaptation. Those who perceive in adaptation a desecration to the original seem to ignore the idea of trauma being necessary not only for tragedy, but for catharsis. Aristotle's theory of catharsis as a cure for theatre-induced post traumatic (or should I say dramatic) stress seems to suggest that the original tragedy itself is traumatic by nature.

In one sense, all contemporary productions of Greek tragedy are double translations, adaptations filtered through contemporary sensibilities both in terms of the spoken language of the play and also the visual and referential cultures of production. Rock and pop Aeschylus thus involves double reception, in which the Greek original is filtered through both popular music and popular audience conceptions of "Greek tragedy", and the public performance is received as both. The overall concern, if reviews of the productions below are consulted, is the relevancy of Greek tragedy to us today and the authenticity of an adaptation. Multiple reviews of the American Repertory Theatre's *Prometheus Bound* cite how "relevant" the tragedy is to the world today in terms of its themes of resistance to tyranny. It is also relevant in another sense: it appeals to young audiences who are more likely to go to concerts than classical theatre: "[Prometheus is] still the Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind, and got chained to a mountainside for his troubles; but he's also every eyeliner-wearing, damn-The-Man scene kid who ever got grounded for staying out late and huffing paint," proclaimed the review in *Time Out Boston*.[1]

Multiple reviews of Will Power's *The Seven*, on the other hand, expressed concerns of authenticity: it is hip-hop, but is it Aeschylus? In pop music appropriations of Aeschylus, the goals of relevancy and authenticity stand in tension. Can the audience relate to Aeschylus' play, and what themes of the play

1 Jenna Scherer, "Review: Prometheus Bound" *Time Out Boston*. March 15, 2011. http://timeoutboston.com/ arts-culture/theater/67695/review-prometheus-bound.

are pertinent and significant for contemporary theatre-goers? In finding "relevant" themes, do the adapters somehow lose their connection to the original, thereby making the new work somehow less "authentic"?

Perhaps to assuage these critics, a better model for "authenticity" may be found in Mary-Kay Gamel's "Revising 'Authenticity' in Staging Ancient Mediterranean Drama," in which she argues that "textual accuracy" and the use of ancient performance conventions are only one form of authenticity. Instead, we might consider "inductive authenticity," in which the adaptation is "intended or likely to arouse effects on the audience," so that modern adaptation of ancient play "resembles ancient performance in effect."[2] The four adaptations discussed here offer to do just that: blend music, movement and text in a manner different than original Greek practice, in narratives based on Greek originals, but "engage [audiences] as the original production might have done."[3] Simultaneously, the adaptations discussed here reshape Aeschylean tragedy through and into American popular music.

The overall effect of pop music adaptations is to Americanize Aeschylus, to make the narratives appeal to hybrid audiences of both traditional theatre goers and (younger) pop fans, and to reshape Aeschylean dramas through the tropes of popular music. As rock and roll, as well as Blues, Soul, R&B, Bluegrass and hip-hop/rap, are all American inventions (albeit admittedly having become globalized), to use American popular music styles in America renders the plays less Greek and more Green Day, less Athenian and more Anthrax. The plays of Aeschylus, filtered through American pop music thus become Americanized in terms of cultural transmission, context and style. In one sense, the four adaptations considered here are not actual Aeschylus but rather a new form of pop – Greek tragedy adapted for modern audiences through the musical identity of the show employing the same narrative as the Aeschylean original: Hip hop furnishes the basis of *The Seven*, the rock concert format dominates the audience's experience of *Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue presents The Oresteia*, and the progressive activism of Serj Tankian overlays *Prometheus Bound*. These productions place the name of Aeschylus front and center, but they are less presentations of Greek tragedy than appropriations of its narrative and characters. Yet, the simultaneous focus on both Aeschylean original and pop milieu yokes high culture and pop culture equally together. I will consider

2 Mary-Kay Gamel, "Revising 'Authenticity' in Staging Ancient Mediterranean Drama," in *Theorising Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice*, (eds.) Edith Hall and Stephe Harrop (London: Duckworth, 2010: 160).

3 Gamel (160).

each of these productions in chronological order for how they Americanize Aeschylus, use pop convention to frame the narrative and thus appeal to those who would not otherwise seek out Greek tragedy while investing enough of the original in the adaptation to appeal to those who would.

Will Power's *The Seven* originated in September, 2001 in a workshop production at Thick Description Theatre Company in San Francisco, the same group which had produced Will Power's seminal work *Flow*.[4] Subsequently, Power revised and remounted the play in New York in January, February and March of 2006.[5] Finally, the play was mounted at the La Jolla Playhouse in Southern California in February and March of 2008.[6] This makes it both the first and the longest running of the adaptations I consider here, as well as the one seen by the most geographically diverse audiences. Helene P. Foley reads the adaptation as evolving from "a semi-satirical, often humorous analysis of family dynamics and contemporary culture/politics to the tragic battle between brothers and their deaths," which is an accurate summary.[7] However, the play also transculturates the narrative through the tropes and techniques of hip hop to recreate Greek tragedy for a modern urban (or suburban) audience.

The Seven functions as a hip-hop "sampling" of Aeschylus and a "mashup" of the Aeschylean original and various hip-hop texts.[8] In hip-hop, to "sample" is to use a small but recognizable piece of music, frequently looping it so it plays over and over, and then rapping over the sample in order to create a new work. For example, "Mo Money, Mo Problems" by Notorious B.I.G., P. Diddy and Mase, samples the chorus of Diana Ross's "I'm Coming Out"; Eminem's

4 Mark de la Viña, "Tragedy of 'Seven' transcends years" *San Jose Mercury News* (23 August 2001): 1F.

5 For reviews and analyses of the New York *Seven*, see Michael Peter Bolus "Review: Hecuba / The Seven" *Theatre Journal* 59/1 (March 2007): 121–123; Jennifer Dunning, "He's taking Aeschylus Hip-Hop" *New York Times* (10 February 2006): E1; Charles Isherwood, "Hip Hop of the Gods" *New York Times* (26 February 2006): B4; and Peter Meineck, "Live from New York: Hip Hop Aeschylus and Operatic Aristophanes" *Arion* 14/1 (2006): 145–168.

6 For reviews and analyses of the San Diego *Seven*, see Charles McNulty, "Aeschylus Gets Remixed" *Los Angeles Times* (20 February 2008): E3; Peter Ng, "Toward a more magnificent 'Seven'" *Los Angeles Times* (17 February2008): F4.; Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., "Aeschylus Got Flow: Afrosporic Greek Tragedy and Will Power's *The Seven*," in *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas*, edited by Kathryn Bosher, Justine McConnell, and Patrice Rankine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015: 543–555).

7 Helene P. Foley, *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012: 105).

8 See Wetmore (2014).

"Stan" uses lines and music from Dido's "Thank You." No prior knowledge of the sample by the listener is assumed, but a listener who knows the source, then generates further meaning by combining references from the original song and the new lyrics. A "mashup" involves taking two or more texts and blending them together in a way that each frames and comments on the other. The best example is Danger Mouse's 2004 *The Gray Album*, a mixing of Jay-Z's *The Black Album* with The Beatles' *White Album*. In *The Seven*, Will Power samples Aeschylus and mashes up *Seven against Thebes* with elements of hip hop culture in order to create an adaptation that is aimed at an audience that knows more about Lady Gaga than Laius.

Hip-hop expropriations of Shakespeare (and for that matter Shakespearean appropriations of hip-hop) are rooted in what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. refers to in *The Signifying Monkey* as "signifyin(g)."[9] "The impetus of African-American signifying," states James R. Andreas, Sr., "is the search for the 'black voice' in the 'white written text.'"[10] In *The Seven*, Will Power seeks to find the "black voice" in the ostensibly "white text" of Aeschylus, as well as the "American voice" in the "European text."[11] Power utilizes hip hop music and culture (both African-*American* and *black*) to retell the narrative of the Aeschylean drama for a contemporary audience that is American, yet often ethnically mixed. He incorporates the techniques and tropes of hip hop and the narrative and characters of not only *Seven Against Thebes* but the later Oedipus plays of Sophocles in order to tell a story of the legacies of violence and power not just as presented by Aeschylus but also as they relate to violence and disempowerment in the American Black community.

Power's adaptation does not retain Aeschylus' dramaturgy. *Seven Against Thebes* shows little and reports much. The play shows Eteocles interacting with the chorus as he waits for his brother Polynices to attack. There is no Oedipus, no Polynices in the original, and the eponymous seven are off-stage for the main event, the results of the battle being reported by a messenger. *The Seven*,

9 Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., "Big Willie Style: Staging Hip-Hop Shakespeare and Being Down with the Bard," in *Shakespeare and Youth Culture,* (eds.) Jennifer Hulbert, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. and Robert York (New York: Palgrave, 2006: 148).

10 James R. Andreas, Sr., "Signifyin' on *The Tempest* in Mama Day." In *Shakespeare and Appropriation*, (eds.) Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer (London: Routledge, 1999: 105).

11 Although I have argued elsewhere that Power himself does not see this dynamic occurring as he believes Aeschylus was appropriating Egyptian cultural material and thus Power is reclaiming an Afrocentric text: see Wetmore (2014). However, Power's own interpretation of the relationship between African culture and ancient Greek culture is irrelevant to an audience member who watches an Americanized, hip-hop adaptation of what the audience member perceives as an ancient European (read: white) text.

however, begins with the introduction of the DJ, who serves as choral figure. Power then dramatizes everything that Aeschylus conveys through narrators. *The Seven* brings the two brothers, and the seven champions onstage, and even Oedipus makes an appearance, dressed as a 70s pimp, telling the audience "y'all don't know who ya fuckin' with" and referring to himself punning-ly as "The Original Mutha Fucka," deploying a term from hip-hop culture and 70s blaxspoitation cinema that inspired it, to refer to Oedipus's own lack of knowledge concerning his wife/mother and his incestuous relationship with Jocasta. This joke alone shows how *The Seven* was aimed at multiple audiences.

The Seven attracted a variety of audiences depending on where it was performed, how it was marketed, and the audience base of the area. The production in San Francisco, while still attracting mixed-race audiences, saw a predominantly African-American audience; while New York attracted more mixed audiences, with more Euro-Americans than other ethnicities. The La Jolla production, located in the suburbs of a wealthy suburb of San Diego saw a significantly older audience with a much higher percentage of Euro-Americans than the New York and San Francisco audiences. The hybrid audience of La Jolla, with fewer hip hop heads and more cultural elites who could afford the significantly more expensive tickets, required that all constituencies be able to get at least some of the references. Thus, some of the Greek references might have passed over the heads of those who got the ODB and Wu Tang references. For San Diego, Power further adapted his adaptation for a more general, less urban audience.

Perhaps the best indication of Power's approach came at the beginning of the performance, when after the DJ presented herself to the audience she played a record of a sonorous voice reciting lines from Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (in English translation) in a stereotypically stilted classical style: "O house of endless tears / O hopeless end / It is the curse of your father that bears fruit in you / And the harvest is no blessing." Power and his onstage alter-ego use this "sample" to remind us of the original, but like all good DJs, they loop it, flip it and reframe it: "Yo, kinda pessimistic, right? But his voice sound tight. Kinda like Freddy Kruger if he went to Harvard or somethin'." *The Seven* is as much comment on Greek tragedy and the popular idea of how it is performed as it is actual adaptation of Greek tragedy. It has a kind of respect for the original, but it will now sample it, comment on it, and tell it through deconstructed narrative and outside references. The traditional actor's voice is "tight" (a compliment), and both threatening ("Freddy Kruger") and smart ("if he went to Harvard"). The playing of the sample reminds the audience of what Aeschylus is "supposed to sound like," and the production then proceeds to instead perform the story following the conventions of hip hop.

The actual combat between champions was not reported as a series of offstage combats but instead performed onstage as a series of rap and dance battles. Hip-hop battles and break dancing emerged in part as a means to fight without harming one's opponent, a direct response to the rise in Black-on-Black crime in the United States. Beginning in the late 60s and surging through the 80s and continuing into the present, rising urban unemployment, the development of gang culture and economies, and the introduction into urban areas of comparatively inexpensive, highly addictive narcotics such as crack cocaine resulted in skyrocketing violence in the black community, much of it black-on-black crime.[12] As young black men saw their unemployment numbers rise as manufacturing jobs left the urban areas, they also saw the rates of violent crime and incarceration increase. Most of those killed in American cities from the 80s to the present were victims of black-on-black crime. It is this reality that Power sought to present on stage.

The final fight between Eteocles and Polynices, in New York a complex dance-combat routine choreographed by Bill T. Jones, received an additional opening ritual for the La Jolla production which framed the fight as a mythic battle between brothers that would shape an entire nation. Polynices thus moves from an off-stage presence in Aeschylus to one who receives as much stage time as Eteocles in Power's show. The additional sequence expanded the frame of reference to comment on black-on-black crime from Cain and Abel to Biggie and Tupac and the war in Iraq. These references grounded the production in rap technique but also served to ground the production in and contemporary American culture. Power claims the final fight was influenced by the Wu Tang Clan, a rap group who was also referenced by Oedipus, who claimed to be "the original ODB" – a reference to rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard, a member of Wu Tang.[13]

The music changed from production to production, as the sound of hip-hop changed from 2001 to 2006. Even the two year transition between 2006 and 2008 required that the music be rewritten and/or remixed to keep up with current hip hop sounds. In order to maintain authenticity of hip hop, the beats needed to reflect current trends, which can shift tremendously in two years. Since trends in the rap world change so rapidly, the hip hop in the "ad-raptation" of *The Seven against Thebes* Power needed to be constantly updated to maintain authenticity. The music of the 2001 San Francisco production was changed for the 2006 New York staging, and changed again for the 2008 La Jolla staging. Thus *The Seven* was always bringing Aeschylus up-to-date.

12 Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow* (New York: The New Press, 2010: 41).

13 Ng F4.

Foley cannily observes that hip hop "evolved as a ritualized attempt to mediate street violence with language and stories."[14] Yet hip hop music also became a chronicle of that violence, witness such songs as Ice-T's "New Jack Hustler" or "O.G. – Original Gangster", or N.W.A.'s "Straight Outta Compton" or Eazy-E's "Boyz-n-the-Hood", which were accused of glorifying the same violence that they ostensibly mediated. In one sense, this is another example of Gamel's "inductive authenticity" – Aeschylus's texts were written by a citizen soldier who had seen the types of violence his plays describe (especially if we consider inter-poleis combat as a form of metaphoric fratricidal violence). Likewise, hip hop artists write of the violence they have seen and, like Aeschylus the solider, may have even perpetrated themselves.

In contrast, Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue, a vaudeville and theatre troupe founded by Debra Buonaccorsi and Steve McWilliams and based in Washington D.C., approached Aeschylus through a panoply of classic rock styles that did not need to change, but that also shaped reception. The troupe's website proudly proclaims:

> If the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus had gone on tour with Led Zeppelin, Woody Guthrie and a carnie troupe, this is what he would have written. A tale of blood, guts and vengeance, this is Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, re-charged. Rowdy, raucous, loud and literate.[15]

This claim is a standard ploy in marketing adaptations: had the playwright been alive today under the present cultural influences, the classical play would have been written in the way the present company is adapting it. Rather than bring us closer to understanding Aeschylus on his terms, the production reinscribes Aeschylus' text using the tropes of particular types of rock and roll, thus giving us Aeschylus on our terms. Athena, for example, sings Gospel, while the Furies sing punk.

Presented in 2008 as part of the Capital Fringe Festival in Washington, and again in 2009 at the Church Street Theatre, this *Oresteia* was an 80-minute reduction of the original set in a sort of 1930s dust bowl carnival. Simultaneously, however, the production set about to establish a rock concert atmosphere: the set suggested a travelling rock concert, with props and instruments pulled from trunks and cases. Before the show cast members sold beer to attendees and performed vaudeville tricks such as juggling in front of the curtain. The

14 Foley (106).

15 Description taken from Dizzy Miss Lizzie's website: http://www.getdizzywithlizzie.com/productions.php.

overall effect was to lessen the sense of classical tragedy and instead create the milieu of a carnival or rock concert. The mixing of bluegrass, classic rock and the visuals of a 30s carnival to tell the story also served to Americanize the play.

The performance began with a Greek history lesson, telling the story of the Trojan War, so the audience would have all the necessary backstory. The show then introduced Clytemnestra (Maria Egler) and Agamemnon (Steve McWilliams), following the story of the *Oresteia* through the murder of Agamemnon, the revenge killing of Clytemnestra and a descent into hell by Orestes with three Furies in black leather fetish outfits and neon wigs tormenting him until freed by Athena. A silent Iphigenia also dances through the piece, reminding audiences of the cause of the cycle of murder.

The story is told through a blend of rock and roll, burlesque, vaudeville, profanity, and beer. Particular styles of rock music were used to define character. As noted above, Athena, a goddess, sang gospel, suggesting that her concerns were not the immediate but rather her concern for Orestes' salvation aimed at the eternal. The Furies, on the other hand, employed punk, an angry, destructive nihilistic rock, rooted in three chords and fast, angry playing.

Critical response focused on the event as a rock spectacle. "Who knew an ancient Greek tragedy could be so fun?" asked one critic.[16] While some observed that the idea of a soldier's return from a long war to family violence on the home front could be seen as socially relevant, instead the show presented the tragedy as pop performance: "Even with such bloody subject matter, the show is a comedy."[17] One reviewer connected the rock concert style with the performing of "the epic story,"[18] a comment that would seem to link the production concept more to Homer than Aeschylus. In other words, Aeschylus' narrative was filtered through the variety of subgenres of rock and visual spectacle for entertainment purposes.

The next adaptation to be considered here is the American Repertory Theatre's 2011 staging of *Prometheus Bound*. This production was strongly identified with its creators and adaptors: director Diane Paulus, nominated for a Tony award for her revival of the rock musical *Hair*, book and lyric writer

16 Jon Rochetti, "The Oresteia – If Greek Mythology Were This Fun ... We'd All Be Quoting Homer." Planet Eye Traveler.com. 16 July 2009. http://www.planeteyetrevaler.com/2009/07/16/the-oresteia-if-greek-mythology-were-this-funwed-all-be-quoting-home/.

17 Maureen O'Rourke, "The Oresteia" DC Theatre Scene. 21 July 2009. http://dctheatrescene.com/2009/07/21/the-oresteia-2/.

18 Ibid.

Steven Sater, best known for authoring the rock musical *Spring Awakening*, and especially Armenian-American composer and political activist Serj Tankian, best known as the founder and lead singer/songwriter for the progressive alternative rock band System of a Down (SOAD), whose songs frequently focus on issues of social justice. All four members are of Armenian descent and they frequently condemn the Armenian Genocide of 1915, American atrocities in the wars on terror and in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the actions of corporations. Their music is hailed as progressive, both politically and artistically. It is Tankian's identity as a rock star dedicated to social justice and fighting tyranny that becomes conflated with Prometheus in the ART adaptation.

The program for the performance featured essays by Paulus, Sater and Tankian, all of whom emphasized the human rights issues around which the production focused. Sater calls the play "the most searing indictment of tyranny ever written," and Tankian wrote, "the Prometheus story really resonated with me in terms of injustice and tyranny."[19] Following these notes is a letter from Joshua Rubenstein, Northeast Regional Director for Amnesty International, announcing "The Prometheus Project," a partnership to raise awareness by dedicating specific performances to eight prisoners of conscience: Jafar Panahi (Iran), Survivors of Sexual Violence (Democratic Republic of Congo), Dhondup Wangchen (China), David Kato (Uganda), Tran Quoc Hien (Vietnam), Doan Van Dien (Vietnam), Doan Huy Chuong (Vietnam), Norma Cruz (Guatamala), Reggie Clemons (United States), and Nasrin Sotoudeh (Iran) who are equated with the mythic titan Prometheus.[20] Amnesty International volunteers were in the lobby before and after the performance, soliciting donations, encouraging the signing of petitions, and providing information about political prisoners all over the world.

Without exception, every review mentioned Amnesty International as a sponsor and motivating aspect of the performance. The local Amnesty International webpage featured the production before and during the run of the show. By partnering with Amnesty the production transformed Prometheus into the original prisoner of conscience. Yet, as Megan Stahl observed, "the leather-clad performers, techno-inspired lighting, and pounding choral repetition prevented such political commentary from resonating in the dance club atmosphere."[21] Esti Bernstein agrees, noting, "Emily Rebholz's costumes, characterized by studded belts and excessive eyeliner, turn the Greek chorus into

19 "Writer and Lyricist's Note" and "Composer's Note" from *Prometheus Bound* program: 11, 12.

20 *Prometheus Bound* program: 13–16.

21 Megan Stahl, "Review: *Prometheus Bound*" *Theatre Journal* 64/1 (March 2012): 116–117.

a group of rebellious, subversive teenagers."[22] In other words, the rock show overwhelmed the political themes of the drama. The production had its origins in Sater translating Aeschylus's play and sending the script to Paulus. He asked her if she heard music, and "the music she heard was rock 'n' roll."[23] They agreed to ask Tankian to compose the music. "He has that kind of anarchy and that rebelliousness and defiance, 'cause it's rough and its aggressive," Paulus surmised.[24] Rock music is the music of rebellion and defiance. It is the heart of youth culture. Rock music transforms *Prometheus Bound* into a tale of youthful rebellion against tyranny, that will not back down or play by anyone else's rules. Prometheus is a "rebel with a cause," a young man resisting the older generation's demands for conformity and acceptance of its values. Interestingly, the original Prometheus was not a young rebel at all – as a Titan he is, in fact, older than Zeus. Prometheus was thus technically an "old rebel," refusing the dictates of a tyrannical younger generation.

The irony, of course, is that by the first decade of the 21st century, rock and roll is not particularly defiant anymore and rock and roll musicals have been commonplace for years. High school kids perform *Rent* and *Spring Awakening*. Rock festivals such as Lollapallooza and Vans Warped Tour ordinarily offer numerous opportunities for political action, including voter registration, free HIV testing, and opportunities to volunteer for various causes. All of this further serves to frame the presence of Amnesty International at the A.R.T. as part of a socially progressive rock and roll event. *Prometheus Bound* celebrates Aeschylus as a "radical" playwright who constructed Prometheus "as the first prisoner of conscience."[25] He is a teen rebel. He is an American. And, as the above rock festivals show, social activism is just another part of rock culture. While it is reductivist to Aeschylus, it also promotes Aeschylus to a sizable young audience of popular music enthusiasts by bringing the knowledge of the original through its adaptation: *Prometheus Bound* was one of the most popular shows at the A.R.T. during the 2011 season. Reviewers from student newspapers from the colleges in the area reported attending the production multiple times, just as they would a band they were particularly fond of.

22 Esti Bernstein, "Greek mythology latest subject for the A.R.T." *Tufts Daily* (March 8, 2012) <http://tuftsdaily.com/mobile/arts/greek-mythology-latest-subject-for-the-a-r-t1.2508964>.

23 Laura Collins-Hughes, "A Greek tragedy, now set to rock music" *Boston Globe* February 20, 2011. http://boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2011/02/20/prometheus_bound_is_a_greek_tragedy_set_to_rock_music.

24 Ibid.

25 *Prometheus Bound* program: 6.

The final production under consideration here is the summer 2014 performance of *Abbamemnon* by the Troubadour Theatre Company ("The Troubies") of Los Angeles. The play, directed by Troubie Artistic Director Matt Walker and created by the company was the latest in a series of classical play/pop music mashups. The company is known for blending a Shakespeare play with the music of a specific group, such as in *Fleetwood Macbeth*, *The Comedy of Aerosmith*, *Much Adoobie Brothers About Nothing*, *As U2 Like It*, and *Hamlet, The Artist Formerly Known as Prince of Denmark*. The company had twice before adapted Greek material in the same manner: 2009's *Oedipus the King, Mama* (Sophocles' play mashed up with the music of Elvis, his gyrations explained by his hobbling at birth!) and 2011's *For the Birds*, Artistophanes' comedy blended with the music of the Eagles, The Black Crows, the Byrds, Wings and Sheryl Crow.

Abbamemnon, on the other hand, is a disco-inspired adaptation of Aeschylus that recognizes the audience might be more familiar with the music of ABBA than the Greek tragedy and employs that fact in a metatheatrical manner throughout the show to deconstruct the idea of seeing a Greek tragedy in the present. The chorus after the watchman's monologue lists a number of names and then, after "Helen of Troy", tells the audience, "That's the last name you'll recognize tonight." They comment throughout the choral ode on Aeschylus's choice of images ("that one is particularly gross") or even just paraphrasing ("there's a whole thing here about two eagles we are not going to get into"), which seems to imply that what is truly Aeschylean about *The Oresteia* is not the language but the narrative itself, which the Troubies relocate to Southern California (something they do with all of the plays they adapt). Abbamemnon is thus "King of Malibu," who sailed to Troy. The watchman at play's beginning stands atop a lifeguard tower, a replica of the ones on the beaches of Malibu. Topical references also are dropped quickly, for example, Clytemnestra is referred to as "worse than the Kardashians" and Odysseus is compared to *Captain Philips*. In short, the text is adapted freely and much is discarded in the name of accessibility and keeping the narrative flowing forward.

It is in the adaptation not only of Aeschylus's play but also the music of ABBA that trauma is also presented. Lyrics are changed and adapted for the play in order to advance the story. In some cases, however, the original lyrics are kept and seem remarkably in tune (pardon the pun) with *Agamemnon* as written by Aeschylus. "Mamma Mia" is replaced by the words "Abbamemnon," giving both the background of the Trojan war and setting up the character before his appearance. The use of this song is an exemplar of the Troubies and this practice at their best. Clytemnestra sings the opening lyrics of the original: "I've been cheated by you since I don't know when / So I made up my mind, it must

come to an end." Audiences unfamiliar with Aeschylus but who know their ABBA immediately had the context of the story. The original song suggests a person whose lover is constantly philandering and whom she takes back every time as he is irresistible. The song also contains the repeated lyric, "Mamma mia, does it show again? / My my, just how much I've missed you / Yes, I've been brokenhearted / Blue since the day we parted," which the Troubies used to explain the separation of Clytemnestra and "Abbamemnon" for ten years.

Subsequently, ABBA songs are used to further Aeschylus's narrative: "Dancing Queen" introduces Clytemnestra, and, of course, "Cassandra" introduces that character, the eponymous seer singing the opening lines: "Down in the street they're all singing and shouting / Staying alive though the city is dead," transforming the disco anthem into a dirge for Troy. "Voulez Vous," a song ostensibly about sexual conquest, takes on new meaning when Abbamemnon sings it about Troy in a bloody flashback to the war.

As with the other adaptations, *Abbamemnon* uses the tropes and themes of the musical style to inform its translation of Aeschylus for modern audiences. Unlike the other three productions analyzed here, however, *Abbamemnon* does not adapt the tragedy or the trauma. When the messenger enters to tell of Abbamemnon's imminent arrival, he has a false spear through him, leading to many sight gags. The tragedy does not run deep and the tongues in this play are firmly in the cheeks of the performers, even as they recite Aeschylus's lines, and the reason is the type of music employed.

Disco itself (from "discotheque," a French word for "library of phonograph records") is a dance music developed in the 70s relying upon driving beats and developing out of funk and psychedelic music from the late 60s and early 70s. The themes of disco music include desire, sexual promiscuity, endless partying and dancing and having a good time. There are no sad ballads in disco, nor any traumatic songs. Thus, disco as a form is inherently untragic. The Troubies' *Abbamemnon* is in many ways a parody of Aeschylus, or, more accurately, a disco version of *The Oresteia*. And just as disco versions of previously existing songs like Walter Murphy's "A Fifth of Beethoven" and Louis Clark's "Hooked on Classics" and even Meco's "*Star Wars* Theme" take a known melody and put it to a disco beat, thus serving as a form of classical adaptation within music, so, too, does the Troubie's *Abbamemnon* put Aeschylus to a danceable beat, but in doing so remove some of the weight and all of the tragedy from it.

The reason why the other three adaptations discussed here maintain Aeschylus's tragic milieu is that the musical forms employed to adapt the plays not only Americanize them, they also are capable of maintaining the tragic nature of the narrative. Disco, without a mode for the tragic, is incapable of keeping Aeschylus tragic.

9.2 Conclusion

All four of these adaptations reinscribe Aeschylus' plays in an American cultural space. Can we only accept the Greeks on our own terms? Not necessarily, but the commercial and critical success of all four of the productions considered here would seem to suggest that filtering Aeschylus through popular music is a successful strategy to generate audience attention. And in doing so, as Gamel theorizes, they ultimately resemble ancient Greek performance in effect on the audience rather than fidelity to text, and give a modern/ancient, Greek/American Aeschylus.