

EVA PALMER-SIKELIANOS DANCES AESCHYLUS: THE POLITICS OF HISTORICAL REENACTMENT WHEN STAGING THE RITES OF THE PAST

SAMUEL N. DORF

Abstract

Eva Palmer-Sikelianos (1874–1952), along with her husband, the poet Angehlos Sikelianos, founded the first modern Delphic Festival in 1927 in an effort to revive the Ancient Greek rites that took place on that spot over 2,500 years before. She invited “overseers of culture” from around the globe to convene in the holy city of Delphi for a reenactment of the performance of *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus in the ancient amphitheater, an Olympic-styled athletic contest, and an exhibition of Greek crafts. This paper explores Palmer-Sikelianos’s choreography, music and dramaturgy for her reconstructed *Prometheus Bound* in light of her own research on ancient Greek culture and our modern theories of historical reenactment. Based on silent film records of Palmer-Sikelianos’s 1930 festival, her own autobiography, her collaborations with Natalie Barney on Greek-themed theatricals in the early 1900s, and comparisons to the movement vocabulary and other contemporary stagings of ancient Greek festivals and sport, I demonstrate how Palmer-Sikelianos blended the oldest sources on ancient Greek ritual music and dance that she could find with what she saw as an authentic “spirit” of Greek culture as observed in modern Greek society. Compared to the Ballets Russes’s reenactment of ancient Greece, Palmer-Sikelianos’s project to reenact “authentic” Greek theater and choreography illustrates that theories of theatrical historical reconstruction in the early twentieth century were heavily influenced by contemporary theatrical, political, and social events. And like the Fokine and Nijinsky models, Palmer-Sikelianos’s staging redefines ancient dance through the prisms of ancient sources and modern aesthetics.

Keywords

Historical reenactment, fantasy, imagination, archaeological performance, Delphic Festivals, alternative archaeology

As dance scholars, we have created a soup of terms to describe the contemporary performance of works that have been danced in the past: revivals, reproductions, reconstructions, recreations, restagings, reenactments and reworkings (Hutchinson Guest, 2000, pp. 65–66). The reliability of dance notation systems as a means to reproduce a choreographer’s piece for later audiences remains debatable (Whatley, 2005). As Helen Thomas (2000, p. 130) has written, out

of fear of “the ossification of a *lived* tradition”, dance (like music) benefits from a work’s evolution, a conscious tweak to the original recipe with each successive reworking, restaging, revival, etc. Millicent Hodson and her husband and long-time collaborator, Kenneth Archer, exemplify this evolving tradition in their dance reconstructions, notably in *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913). But how much is just construction? And when material is lost, what do we use to construct the lost gestures of the past?

For Hodson, empirical evidence found in archives is vital in the revivification of the ancient past on the ballet stage. We are all familiar with the collaborative work created by Stravinsky, Nijinsky and Roerich, and most of us have seen Hodson’s 1987 reconstruction of Nijinsky’s lost choreography live or on video. She opens her 1996 edition of the reconstructed choreographic score by acknowledging a loss. Her preface begins with a section titled “Casebook for a Lost Masterpiece”, and her narrative for the reconstruction is a narrative of rediscovery, of detective work, arduous study, investigation. Hodson’s prefacing materials lay out the exhaustive research she had collected; each bold-faced section heading leads the reader through her process – “The Investigation”, “Reconstructing the Crime”, “The Evidence” –, the whole reading like a primetime police procedural. We have a crime, a twist, and then a compelling trial that lays out the evidence in a dramatic and convincing fashion (Hodson, 1996, pp. vii–xxvi).

But can we rediscover lost dances like a detective would solve a crime? What is the forensic evidence? How much has been contaminated? Can we trust the witnesses on the stand? Hodson’s “Exhibit A” consists of just a handful of photos; Exhibit B: drawings made in a darkened theater; Exhibit C: notes made on a piano score; and Exhibit D: memories. The rest is taken from the scholar’s imagination through embodied practice. To borrow terminology of Diana Taylor (2003), how much is owed to the archive and how much to the repertoire? Both the seriousness with which Hodson treats her fragmented “evidence” and her imaginative reconstruction are reminiscent of Roerich’s own methods used in the conception of *Le Sacre du printemps*: she spins creative and vibrant colors out of a few threads of surviving relics. In other ways, Hodson’s work mirrors that of another dance reenactor, Eva Palmer-Sikelianos, an American expatriate who married a famed Greek poet, moved with him to Greece, and in 1927 and 1930 founded a festival that sought to revive ancient Greek theater, dance, music, and sport for the world.

The scholar’s place within the project of performing history is the topic of my current project. Roerich, Hodson and Sikelianos are all unique in that they serve as both scholars and artists: they all seek, or sought, to bring the past back to life not chiefly through scholarly articles (they published those, too), but through works, through performances of dancing bodies for modern audiences.

Of course, separating the scholar’s passions, imaginations and fantasies from the objectivity of historical research poses a problem. In historiography, “imagination” can be used as a criticism for the writing of historical works that are viewed as an artistic and creative process akin to fiction as opposed to objective scholarship. The term “imagination” can also be used in

historiography to signify the creative process historians use to make sense of historical facts (Ritter, 1986, pp. 216–223). One might call the former “scholarly fantasy” and the latter “scholarly imagination”.

In English, “imagination” comes from the Latin *imaginare* (“to form an image or to represent”), while “fantasy” is Greek (*φαντασία*, “making visible”). Both fantasy and imagination play critical roles in our understanding of historical performance. As dancers and dance researchers, we acknowledge that “performing” is yet another form of scholarship.

In the field of archaeology, “performance” also constituted a critical methodology for late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century scholars (Evans, 2008, pp. 147–161). The three-dimensional models of archaeological sites popular in the second half of the nineteenth century provide windows into the past; the act of constructing them blends art and science, and attracted scientists and connoisseurs equally. The discipline’s interest in visualizations of the past mirrored the public’s interest. Models of sites found their way from universities to museums and private collections in the early decades of the twentieth century. These models are another method of “seeing” the past, rather than merely “reading” the past, and the scholarship of them is a critical starting point for my own work (*ibid.*, p. 157). For at least forty years the academy has looked skeptically upon those “experimental archaeologists”, who build their own fifteenth-century butter churns, Viking ships, and American Civil War uniforms, noting that experiments do not prove what was actually done at the time. In the early days of the twentieth century, as the field of archaeology began to emerge as a science rather than an adventurous sport for the wealthy, fantasy and performance of the artist played a much larger role in unearthing the past.

Le Sacre du printemps is an excellent example of this type of collaboration between archaeology and performance. It was not the first, nor the last, but placing it in conversation with the methodologies of other archaeological performances like Palmer-Sikelianos’s allows us to view *Le Sacre* as part of a larger project to revivify the past.

Le Sacre owes much to Nicholas Roerich’s archaeological passions. Roerich discovered the excitement of archaeology at an early age, helping to excavate burial mounds outside his hometown as a boy (Decter, 1989, p. 19). As Lynn Garafola (1990–1991, p. 402) has written, “[f]rom his earliest years, he used the fragments of the real past to supply details of a legendary one”. Archaeological study went hand-in-hand with art. His earliest drawings include academic studies of ancient Greek statues (Aeschylus and Sophocles) dating from 1893. Within a few years, his paintings turned to more Slavophile subjects, namely the ancient civilizations of the bronze-age inhabitants of what would eventually be part of the Russian Empire. Many years later, Roerich described how these early childhood experiences of unearthing rusted swords and axes coincided with, as cited and translated by Decter (1989), his “beloved history lessons, but”, he writes, “in my memory lie close to geography and to Gogol’s fantastical historical fiction as well” (Roerich, 1974, p. 84). His methods were similar to those of other wealthy scholars at the time. Roerich established a familiar process: archaeological research, often conducted in

a less than rigorous way, rendered into a work of art: in this case, a painting. For *Le Sacre*, the source material – the scholarship – is another work of art, rather than a more scholarly exegesis. Millicent Hodson (1986–1987, p. 7) describes the transfer as such:

When Nijinsky set the solo for the Chosen Maiden on his sister, Bronislava, he asked her to visualize certain Roerich paintings and told her that “the beauty of the tinted stones and the wall paintings of the cave dwellers have inspired Roerich’s own art”. [...] Among the canvases he asked her to visualize was *The Idols of Ancient Russia*.

Kenneth Archer has suggested that Roerich’s paintings were indeed the “archaeological sources” relied upon by Nijinsky in devising his choreography.¹ According to Nijinska, her brother had much to gain from his collaboration with Roerich. She recalled, “Vaslav often told me how much he liked to listen to Roerich talking about his studies of the origin of man, describing the pagan rites and prehistory of the tribes ‘that roamed the land we now call Russia’” (Nijinska, 1981, p. 461).

Part archaeology, part ethnography, *Le Sacre* blends Russian folk tunes with the magical realism of Roerich’s imagined past. The vibrant peasant costumes worn by the dancers incorporate iconography of the old Slavonic deities, which Millicent Hodson has argued appear in the choreography as well. If Hodson’s reconstruction is correct, the motifs on Roerich’s costumes inspired Nijinsky’s ground designs.

The result – the harsh angular modernism of Stravinsky’s music, and Nijinsky’s choreography against the bright colors and “fusty romanticism”, to quote Roger Fry (1919, p. 112), of Roerich’s design – seems incongruous. We can, however, view the scene and costumes along with Roerich’s paintings as the archaeological source material for the other two collaborators’ ritual sacrifice.

By way of comparison, I would like to turn to another example of how methods of experimental archaeology manifest in another work from the first decades of the twentieth century. The American actress and dancer Eva Palmer-Sikelianos (1874–1952) was a childhood friend of the Grecophile Natalie Clifford Barney and also one of her early collaborators on her Sapphic performances in Paris. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Palmer-Sikelianos developed an immersive embodied process to bring back the lost dance of the ancient Greeks to modern Paris. Through Barney, she met the Duncans – Isadora, Raymond and his Greek wife, Penelope. Their love of Greek antiquity spurred Palmer-Sikelianos to adopt the eccentric dress of Raymond and his wife.

1 Kenneth Archer interview (London, 3 April 1981), cited in Hodson (1986–1987), p. 7.

She soon married Penelope Duncan's brother, the poet Anghelos Sikelianos and resettled in Greece. With her husband, Palmer-Sikelianos founded the first modern Delphic Festival in 1927, which included a performance of *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus in the amphitheater, an Olympic-styled athletic contest, and an exhibition of Greek "peasant handicraft".² Palmer-Sikelianos addressed her theories of how to reproduce ancient Greek drama and music as seen in the Delphic festivals throughout her posthumously published memoirs and, after viewing other recreations of antique music and dance, she vowed to do better.

As Artemis Leontis has argued, Palmer-Sikelianos did not seek the same kind of authenticity as a war reenactor might. When praised by an archaeologist for her ability to solve "archaeological problems which [the scholar] had been working fruitlessly on for years", she responded:

I have read archaeological books only to forget them, and I have never thought of your problems. And besides [...] the performance was bristling with archaeological mistakes, but even you did not detect them, and you are not even conscious of them now. And that is because the place was moving around its own pivot; it was emotionally true, or almost true – and that was sufficient to make you feel that it was correct archaeologically. There is no such thing as archaeological correctness. There is nothing in Greek drama except the emotional truth and consistency of the performers, and the immense responding emotion of those who are present. (Palmer-Sikelianos, 1993, p. 113)

Leontis (2014)³ calls Eva's process an "alternative archaeology", borrowing Bruce Trigger's term (Trigger, 1984), and argues:

Calling modern dance's extensive engagement with relics of Greece's past an "alternative archaeology" brings into view the role artists play in speculating on the lost performing arts using their peculiar talents, experience, and knowledge, and asking interesting questions about ancient space and the human activities that distributed themselves within it from an alternative perspective.

However, Palmer-Sikelianos discounted archaeological fealty in one breath and basked in the accolades of professional scholars in the next. While she took pride in convincing the scholar that she performed a "real" ancient Greek drama when she knew there were inaccuracies, that does not mean that archaeological correctness was not a concern. Her method was not to

2 Palmer-Sikelianos's vision never fully materialized. The festival was supposed to be a first step in founding a university and a school of music, but ultimately became a grand spectacle founded on similar conflicting ideologies as the modern Olympic movement – strident individualism and international harmony. See Palmer-Sikelianos (1983), pp. 103–119; Albright (2007), pp. 165–173; Leontis (2008); Guttman (1992).

3 See also her forthcoming biography of Eva Palmer-Sikelianos.

merely discover how Greece was (or to reproduce a performance for the archive), but to discover how to re-embody it in the present: that is, to bring the ancient Greek past from the archive and into the repertoire (Taylor, 2003).

Writing her memoirs in the 1940s, Palmer-Sikelianos wrote about the first time she had Raymond and Penelope over to her home in Neuilly, outside of Paris, at the turn of the century. She described their “Greek” attire and their shared experimental method.

For many years, I had made ever renewed efforts to imitate the Greek clothes we see on statues, bas-reliefs and vases. [...] I had made a number of dresses [...] I had also worked in leather, and had copied some of the complicated sandals on Greek statues. Penelope and Raymond had made attempts to solve this same problem. (Palmer-Sikelianos, 1993, p. 47)

Raymond, Penelope, and Eva’s conversations in these early days centered around their various attempts to solve the same problems, to recreate archaic Greek dress to wear, and live in, not to hang in a museum. Meanwhile archaeologists such as the Sorbonne Professor Léon Heuzey sought to reproduce ancient garments for the archaeologist to study (Heuzey, 1922). These problems were solved when Raymond arrived at the idea of making a loom so that they could weave a cloth that would hold the folds they desired. The Duncan couple soon moved in with the single young American woman, and Raymond began testing out his skills at ancient Greek handiwork around her home: painting ancient Greek styled friezes, making chlamyses, etc.

During all these first days in my house, Raymond had been very busy. From about the first moment, he had started to paint a little frieze in one of the rooms just under a low ceiling. He put in a terra cotta background, and silhouettes of athletes, in various postures, running all round, and looking somewhat like a black-figured vase. He had also acquired a sheet of copper, out of which he produced clasps for our chlamyses, with archaic animals chasing each other round the edge. He was evidently an excellent craftsman. (Palmer-Sikelianos, 1993, p. 48)

Palmer-Sikelianos’s focus on archaeological authenticity in production of a “Greek” lifestyle led to the building of a loom to create her own fabric. In her autobiography, she interrupted her discussions of weaving and dressmaking experiments with notes on archaeological discoveries made later that validated her experimental process:

While writing this chapter, I received a letter from Mrs. Eugene Vanderpool, of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, which says: “We have just been to a lecture by the director of the American School, who said: ‘While excavating a Geometric tomb we came upon evidence bearing out the theory of Eva Sikelianou.’ It seems that they found an iron object which had lain against the shroud of the body buried in the tomb; and which, during the process of rusting, had picked up the imprint of the cloth. It clearly showed the pattern of the weave: a heavy warp, and an almost imperceptible weft. Mr. Morgan said that it not only proved your theory, as shown in the weaving

of the Delphic Festival, but it showed that ten centuries earlier in Geometric times, this method was used for the same reason: to produce the richness of folds seen through Greek and pre-Greek vase painting". (ibid., 1993, pp. 48–49)

With the archaeologist's validation that her fabrics were indeed the same weft as those made by the ancient Greeks, Palmer-Sikelianos felt confident in her process. So, despite her disavowal of archaeological correctness, answering archaeological questions with modern practice became a dominant theme in Eva Palmer-Sikelianos's writings, most importantly in her discussions of music, dance and the staging of the first two modern Delphic Festivals with her husband in 1927 and 1930.

In resurrecting the rituals of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, Palmer-Sikelianos restaged the ancient tragedy at the theater of Delphi in Modern Greek, with a cast and chorus of amateur actors and dancers. Like in *Le Sacre*, the tensions between the historical sources and the requirements of a contemporary performance are evidenced in Palmer-Sikelianos's writings. Originally wishing to perform the work intoned monophonically, she acknowledged that audiences needed harmony. That is to say, the archaeological correctness would not work for her own body and the bodies and minds of her collaborators and audiences:

The Greeks knew nothing about what is now called harmony; *ergo*, although they were fine architects, fine sculptors, probably fine painters, and certainly great philosophers, great poets, and the rest of it, in music they were morons. This conclusion seemed final. There was no getting around it; no fooling oneself into believing that they did know anything about harmony; no escaping the fact that, today, music without harmony is pure nonsense, a contradiction in terms. [...] With this, my state of levitation was in decided danger. But I succeeded in steering my mind away from it; in pretending that I did not care. There were so many other things in which they excelled. What matter if the Greeks were not musicians? (ibid., p. 50)⁴

Ultimately, *Prometheus Bound* was performed in a Modern Greek translation (so peasants from the surrounding villages could understand), outdoors, with costumes woven by Palmer-Sikelianos herself. She thought it best in the end to use Modern Greek so that peasants

4 Palmer-Sikelianos based her imagined ancient monophonic Greek music on a combination of Greek Orthodox Church modes and her friend Penelope Duncan's own folk singing (of which we know little about), and employed this music in numerous venues. These ideas developed when Eva Palmer-Sikelianos moved outside of Athens to Kopanas with Raymond and his wife, and ultimately formed the basis of the choruses she created for the Delphic Festivals. Palmer-Sikelianos and Penelope Duncan took up studies with Professor Psachos, a scholar of "Byzantine music" at the National Conservatory in Athens who was also named "Master Teacher of Music of the Great Church of Christ" by the Patriarch of Constantinople, and with his assistance attempted to create a modal organ, to properly accompany the melodies and ancient temperaments she believed were authentic.

could understand it, to avoid problems in pronunciation, and to prove Greek was indeed a “living” language (ibid., p. 108). She took the musical instruction of the chorus on herself as well, giving lessons in “Byzantine music, alternating with gymnastic exercises [...] and [visits to] the national Museum to study, and [...] to make copies of the [...] ancient vases” (ibid., p. 109).⁵ Her technique of staging “Greek” dance closely resembled those of other scholars/artists.

I made a great quantity of sketches in the Museum with a friend who was a sculptor and then, phrase by phrase, I tried to fit the highlights, as it were, or the principal accents in means and music, with what seemed to me appropriate gestures from the vases. (ibid., p. 109)

She then taught the music to the chorus of girls orally as they were not interested in learning Byzantine music notation, and she then encouraged the dancers to act like a real chorus and improvise some of their movements based on the vocabulary she taught them (ibid., p. 110). In a 1930 film of her staging from the Delphic Festival one can see a plastic choreography where the chorus moves in unison akin to the frozen nymphs of Nijinsky’s *Faune* – angled, heads in profile. Dancers strike poses (i.e. arms extended in front of the face with palms turned out) while moving slowly in metered time (Palmer-Sikelianos and Sikelianos, 1930a). A photograph of the 1930 production reproduced in color in *National Geographic* captured the author’s impression of the dance – “like figures on a Grecian urn”.

Palmer-Sikelianos believed that authentic performance was crucial to the athletic contest as well. For the Pyrrhic Dance, she had thirty suits of armor copied from sources in the National Museum, hammered out by hand, which soldiers from the First Army Corps of Greece wore to perform Palmer-Sikelianos’s heavy steps. They danced in a similar plastic manner: making strong forceful gestures to hold static poses. They slowly bent down on one knee and then rose up quickly, they moved back and forth alternatively in plastic poses with their swords up and then with their swords pointed down in cross movements. They would hop, stand sentry, and then march. In the next sequence, they lifted their arms up with their swords and shields while squatting, made a little hop, and then raised their arms as they turned in profile and kneel down, oddly reminiscent of the Dance of the Chosen One in the finale of *Le Sacre* (Palmer-Sikelianos and Sikelianos, 1930b).

The verisimilitude of the amateur performers’ *Prometheus Bound* captivated the audiences. Historian Robert Payne (1960, p. 102) said of Palmer-Sikelianos, “[s]he had a strange power of entering the mind of ancients and bringing them to life again. She knew everything

5 The reference to “gymnastic-exercises” alludes to the work of François Delsarte, whose movement styles were in vogue for “Hellenic” dances (Albright, 2007, p. 151).

about them – how they walked and talked [...] how they latched their shoes [...] what songs they sang, and how they danced, and how they went to bed”. Others noted the “archaeological correctness” of the Delphic Festivals. Ernst Buschor, the Director of the German School of Archaeology, wrote to Palmer-Sikelianos praising this correctness, for which she responded (as discussed above) that it was *not* correct, he was just too blind to notice. It was the play in the outdoor theater that galvanized the archaeologist’s imagination.

Ann Cooper Albright argues that the only archaeologically correct elements of the Delphic Festival were the costumes, made with Palmer-Sikelianos’s hand-woven fabrics, and hand-beaten metal helmets. She asserts that authenticity in costume (Palmer-Sikelianos used silk, which was not available to ancient Greeks), music and dance was sacrificed for the drama (Albright, 2010, p. 71), but it is clear from Palmer-Sikelianos’s writings that all modern concessions in archaeological correctness were painfully made. It is not that archaeological correctness should not be sought out; it is just that it is impossible in a modern world. The tensions between archaeology and ethnography, the past and the present, the archive and the repertoire continued to haunt Palmer-Sikelianos throughout her project.

How does this bring us back to *Le Sacre du printemps*? Lynn Garafola (1989, p. 63) has described the plot of *Le Sacre* as “a vast human tapestry, a vision of primal man and his primal tribe, and the human sacrifice that ensured the continuity of both”. Similarly, *Prometheus* is set in a liminal period in the ancient Greek conception of history: the transition from primitive and nomadic to organized and civilized society. Rising from the muck of Titan brutishness, man emerges with a strong moral character, wit and ingenuity. *Prometheus* is also the story of brain over brawn, of rational thought, and intelligence triumphing over the crude old world. Prometheus is punished for aiding us (the human race – the Ancient Greeks, and the inheritors of the Western Tradition), and his suffering is laid plain for all who witness it. The parallels in plot notwithstanding, Roerich, Stravinsky and Nijinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*, Palmer-Sikelianos’s *Prometheus*, and Hodson’s *Le Sacre du printemps* all lay claim to archival and archaeological sources, and blend the fragmentary historical sources with new material for modern audiences: they blend the archive with the repertoire, the archaeological with the ethnographic and the Modern. In the negotiation of the demands of archaeology and live performance, Palmer-Sikelianos, like Roerich and Hodson, had to find her own balance.

Within a generation, archaeology had adopted a strictly positivist methodology leaving the engagement with performance behind: scholars dug, performers performed. The engagements discussed in this article between modernism and modern science capture not only the evolving ways we perform antiquity, but provide models for how performance can lead to a more vibrant scholarship for disciplines outside of dance and performance studies (such as musicology).

From our current historical perspective it is easy to point out these inaccuracies and dismiss these historical projects outright. Dispelling their myths of fidelity and accuracy, however,

does not preclude the enjoyment of these works. Despite the laborious scholarly preparations to capture the ancient world, perhaps the true value of these collaborations lies in the visceral act on stage, when logic is momentarily abandoned to capture the primal, ineffable magic of a fleeting artistic moment – which transports both the performer and the audience out of time, beyond history and into mythical eternity.

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