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Plague, Pestilence & Pollution : Berkoff's Collision With Aeschylus and Sophocles

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Plague, Pestilence & Pollution:

Berkoff's
Collision With
Aeschylus
and
Sophocles

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

Our humanity is bound to perennial themes in drama, so when a classic play is adapted to 'suit' contemporary audiences, the revised version will often reflect the zeitgeist of the times in which it was produced. The magic of retrospection then allows us to examine the social and political particulars that influence the adapted as well as the original work. Indeed, Steven Berkoff's reworkings of both Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* reflect an unsettled and divided British context in the throes of ideological upheaval during the 1970's and early 1980's. While consistent criticism of leadership and political strife in Berkoff's literature suggests a commitment to socialist ideals, I will also argue that images of death and destruction promote the playwright's didactic humanitarian ends.

Allegorical themes of plague and pestilence in Berkoff's plays suggest images of humanity in the thrall of forces *assumed* to be beyond its control. At the same time, these texts work to empower the audience with the belief that their resistant action has the potential to change the course of history. Similarly, as the polluted and decaying British environment is presented as an antecedent to disease and disorder, Berkoff suggests that localised activity is the basis for positive change. While a thematic focus on curse and the idea of fate illustrates the concept of an individual being 'polluted' through 'no real fault of their own', his work suggests that within the microcosm of individual agency lies the answer to the problems of the macrocosm of society. Hence in Chapter 1 I will argue that pollution creates an environment conducive to plague and pestilence.

As opposed to other forms of literature, theatre is a living entity capable of communicating via the physical senses; a key principle upon which Berkoff builds his Aesthetic. Following in the footsteps of Antonin Artaud, Bertolt Brecht and Jacques Le Coq, Berkoff taps into the power of the theatre to reach beyond logical thought into the deepest recesses of the mind and will. Consequently, I argue that Berkoff's theatrical predecessors in the field of physical theatre inform his attempts to move beyond traditional notions of what theatre should

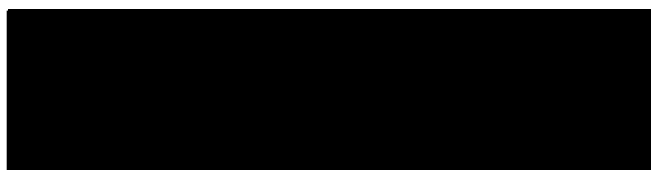
be, what it should *say* and *how* it should say it. In Chapter 2 I will examine Artaud's idea that theatre is like plague in their mutual powers of revelation, transformation and the fact that both are potentially refining social phenomena.

Berkoff's collision with Aeschylus and Sophocles works to purge audiences of the festering sores of their apathy and ignorance by challenging the idea that the conditions of their existence are in some way predetermined and thus immutable. Therefore in Chapter 3 I will look to the historical context and specific political agenda of Berkoff's rewritings as well as his radical treatment of persistent dramatic themes in an attempt to gauge their potential for durability.

Ultimately, I argue that Berkoff as auteur director, actor and playwright is committed to transcending crippling assumptions and patterns of thought in art as in life.

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- iii) contain any defamatory material.



Michelle Aslett

25/ 01/ 2004

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xxox

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Foreword.

'Whatever you do on stage must = the public at the time you stage it'.

Peter Sellars - quoted in *The Director's Voice*, 1988.

1. plague, pestilence and pollution

'What a foul thing I have done, I am the rotten plague' (*Greek*, 183).

Why are we so loath to admit our fascination with blood, pus, wounds, infection, abscesses, sores, ulcers, blisters, germs, boils, rotting corpses or more politely, the morbid, gruesome or grotesque? Owing to the persistently clandestine appeal of the 'polluted' body, pestilential themes in literature and art have retained their widespread popularity. Similarly, a 'polluted' physical environment is a constant threat to human survival, providing those conditions conducive to disease and disorder. Epidemics have been more deadly than all the wars of history combined (Lamonde, 7), accounting for our need to battle 'the mighty germ' even today with the occurrence of AIDS, the Ebola virus and SARS enough to arouse fear similar to that experienced during outbreaks of bubonic plague, influenza or typhus. Indeed, fear and a compulsion to influence the social conscience of the populace have suggested the perennial themes of plague and pestilence to artists of every generation and within every discipline, including those of dramatic literature and performance, which will be my specific foci here.

I will argue that pollution creates grounds for plague and pestilence in Steven Berkoff's re-inventions of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. 'Pollution' in this essay will refer to an unpleasant or unhealthy corruption of the physical environment produced largely by human beings, including more immediate, as well as gradual, irreversible and ultimately devastating forms of corruption. More importantly, pollution refers to the inheritance of a curse, whereby a character is 'polluted' by the inevitability of his or her moral fortune,

or even the mere prediction of his or her fate, as in the case of Sophocles' King Oedipus and Berkoff's Eddy. I will use the term 'Plague' to signify the idea of an uncontrollable epidemic or virus (especially bubonic plague), and also the more colloquial idea of plague as a public or personal torment, affliction or nuisance, where one is 'plagued' by something or someone. I will use the term 'Pestilence' in the sense of an infestation by insects ('pests') including the spreading of disease via fleas and rats, where the idea of a pestilential force refers to any person or thing that might contribute to the infliction and proliferation of plague. Both are used to denote a rapidly contagious, infectious and potentially fatal force. Indeed in Europe of the fourteenth century, bubonic plague was known as 'The Great Pestilence' and even 'The Great Mortality' (Lamonde, 11). In this thesis I will investigate their use as allegorical tools in Berkoff's plays.

Interestingly, themes of plague and pestilence have traditionally been aligned with eschatological concerns, fears of all powerful and unpredictable deities, mortality and divine salvation. However, in Berkoff's texts, themes of politics and leadership consistently eclipse religious and spiritual topics whereby in the more contemporary context of Britain in the 1970's and early 1980's, plague, pestilence and pollution are used to suggest a range of sociopolitical concerns. Throughout *Greek* and *Agamemnon*, inquiry into social structures within modern civilization thus encourages scrutiny into the exploitation of power under capitalist-based leadership.

Indeed, Steven Berkoff's social critiques provide a largely negative depiction of leadership and the oppression of the working classes. 'Power' is presented as a corruptive force, infecting those who endure oppressive and unstable political systems. Equally, the playwright comments upon the apathy of a divided working class and his perception of their unwillingness to better their collective situation. Yet owing to humanity's proven resilience in times of extreme adversity, the plays remain hopeful, despite violent tragic themes and repellent images of disease working to expose the pitfalls of an ideologically corrupt leadership. Also, throughout history the devastating effects of plague have shown us that

such outbreaks are not selective, destroying life regardless of social or moral standing, political ideology, sexual orientation or cultural background. Thus, within a fractured and hierarchical society, plague becomes the great equaliser.

II. reading berkoff

'...in the poisoned entrails throw, hate and good old Tory guile, plots to cover up our sins, lies and slander to beguile, then throw massive outrage in...' (*Sink the Belgrano!*, 160).

In order to read Steven Berkoff's work in the light of its political and social contexts, I propose to read his plays from a cultural materialist standpoint. The significance of cultural materialism lies in its commitment to an interrogation of the relations between literature and social history. Its exponents aim to 'read the canon against the grain: to amplify the voices of the disenfranchised, to expose the guilty political unconscious of the text, to deepen and widen the faultlines in its legitimisation of the status quo' (Kiernan Ryan, xv). Attempts to analyse the verbal and non-verbal manifestations of plague, pestilence and pollution in the staging of Berkoff's *Agamemnon* and *Greek* will thus concentrate on the political and social contexts of England in the 1970's and 1980's and the dissident potential inherent in the tragic texts of Aeschylus and Sophocles.

I would suggest that Berkoff's collision with the theatre of classical Greece and his focus upon the politics of class relations is in itself a cultural materialist approach, whereby the audience is enabled to view its contemporary context through the lens of a temporally distant text. As Ryan says, a cultural materialist reading will perceive a playwright as using 'the literature of yesterday to change the world today' and as being 'concerned as much with the culture of the present as with the culture of the past, which matters insofar as it can be brought to bear constructively on (the) current political predicament' (ix; xvi). Drawing parallels with the sociological dynamics of past culture in his critiques of modern day Britain (or using the 'old' to challenge or understand the 'new'), Berkoff necessarily includes an analysis of the political pitfalls of the Heath,

Wilson, Callaghan and Thatcher governments, which in turn alludes to the likelihood of oppression within future generations.

Underlying much Marxist thought and those theories associated with cultural study is the basic assumption that a capitalist society is a hierarchically divided society. Social or class based divisions and the idea of a fractured society are common themes within Berkoff's texts, highlighting the impossibility of revolution against dominant ideologies whilst the cultural disparities between subcultures remain irreconcilable. In privileging the experience of the lower classes within Britain at this time, Berkoff is effectively staging a protest against the repressive aspects of social institutions such as the family, language, religion, the political system, the education system and the media. While these institutions generate in people the inclination to behave in socially 'acceptable' ways, these social 'norms' can be neither objective nor impartial, having been developed in the interests of those owning social power, and are thus, by definition, exploitative.

Throughout my investigation into Berkoff's texts, the works of Alan Sinfield, Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault have been particularly useful. Sinfield's analysis of established dramatic texts and his thoughts on the politics of dissident reading (particularly in *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*) have been a useful guide as to the significance of structure and the individual within dramatic works. Williams, the 'father' of cultural materialism, has written various exploratory essays regarding drama, with the aim of overcoming existing assumptions and habits of thought through historical comparison and association. Above all, I have looked to his work in *Modern Tragedy*. Foucault's analysis of the means and objectives of power in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* provides specific examples of the social consequences and effects of plague. Power as represented in dramatic texts may therefore be illuminated by depictions of plague and pestilence.

Jan Kott prefers the idea of 'collision' when elaborating on the concepts of theatrical 'revival', 'rewriting' and 'directorial re-invention'. He explains, 'the classics become alive when a collision takes place: the collision of a classical text with a new political and intellectual experience, as well as the collision of the classical text with new theatrical techniques' (Kott, 145-6). For Berkoff, collision with Aeschylus and Sophocles is a vehicle for pushing social and political reform where, similar to the auteur filmmaker, he makes clear his status as the author of an original theatrical event (and also an auteur director of considerable significance). Importantly, whilst reviving classical drama normally entails maintaining the original text within a new historical and theatrical context, he has consistently reworked both text and context.

III. berkoff in the theatre

'I am no player who struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more' (*East*, 25).

Berkoff's desire to reinvigorate and 'express drama in the most vital way imaginable' (*Agamemnon*, 6) may help to explain his resistance to the 'social realism' and 'kitchen sink drama' of the previous generation. From the overwrought, affected dialogues and limited ideological confines of previous realistic forms, the dawning of the 'Age of Aquarius' promised experimental, sensual and ritualistic theatre in keeping with 'an unshackling and abandonment to the joys of Dionysus' (*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, 9). From the earliest times theatre was created in the service of a ritual, contributing to its spiritual or 'magical' value and the impact of the spectacle upon an audience. Conversion of a bourgeois theatre of realism through the introduction of more dynamic, physical and presentational forms thus incorporates Berkoff's adoption of classical, surrealist and epic modes. This results in an experiential theatre where every participant is invited to 'share' in the events on stage.

Berkoff, in his continued practice of 'renovating' classical texts, enjoys the company of respected theatre practitioners. Amongst his contemporaries in this vein of theatrical adaptation are Elizabeth LeCompte, Peter Sellars and Robert Wilson. Parallels also exist in the works of Emily Mann, Maria Irene Fornes and

Richard Foreman, who direct their own work as well as the classics, along with Lindsay Kemp (who trained such artists as Kate Bush), a regular name in 'fringe' circuits who shares Berkoff's interest in masks, mime and movement. These directors will typically use stylized forms of movement and choreography, incorporate other art forms into the drama and manipulate traditional speech patterns (Rosen, VI, 1) in order to afford didactic social commentary.

Agamemnon was, as the playwright puts it, 'freely adapted from the Aeschylus version' (*Agamemnon*, 9) and created over three years in workshop sessions with the London Theatre Group, of which Berkoff is the founding member. The 'definitive' version of the play was presented at the Greenwich Theatre in 1976. Reflecting on his choice of source material, he notes, '...naturally I gravitated to Kafka, Poe, even the heady Aeschylus...revel(ling) in the primal emotions and classic tragedy that might make for a theatre directed at the audience's senses as well as their minds' (*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, 9-10). In this play, the themes of plague, pestilence and pollution are embedded in the historical context immediately preceding Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government, and are thus influenced by the political and ideological tensions of the Cold War and the continuing conflict in Vietnam.

Thatcher's Britain is the target of much of Berkoff's oeuvre, and the Conservative English government that informed her reign as the 'Iron Lady' (or 'Maggot Scratcher' - as consistently referred to in Berkoff's texts) from 1979 until 1990. Berkoff's attempts to transgress popular political ideology through the anti-realistic rendering of Sophocles and Aeschylus upon the contemporary stage are thus embedded within the context of England of the 1970's and early 1980's. *Greek*, written in 1980, is a reworking of the Oedipus story, which 'came ...via Sophocles, trickling its way down the millennia until it reached the unimaginable wastelands of Tufnell Park' (*Greek*, 141). Encouraging scrutiny of Thatcher's England, the ideological legitimization of violence and the institutions of marriage, family and the media, Eddy, Berkoff's modern day protagonist, (Oedipus=Eddy-pus) eventually manages to triumph over the 'British plague' (157). Analysis of

this play will demonstrate that Berkoff's wide-ranging and indeed transgressive approach to theatre belongs to the tradition of radical artists such as Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud.

In looking to polarised criticism in its attempt to explain the artist and his works, one may note inevitable references to personal eccentricities, particularly regarding his acting technique. Berkoff's 'bad boy image' has led to his being dubbed the Johnny Rotten of the theatre (O'Reilly, 4), which helps to explain his appeal to the disenchanted and rebellious youth of 1970's Britain. He spent three months in a detention centre for boys at age fifteen before his professional debut on stage in the era of the 'angry young man' (think Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's 1956 drama *Look Back in Anger*). Certainly, violence, apathy, loneliness, waste and social inequality permeated the East London environment familiar to Berkoff's youth (Currant, 16), an environment that is often the context for his 'punk plays'.

The English punk explosion of the mid 1970's was a reaction to the social and economic repression experienced by the British working classes, as well as a cry of revolt against the banality of the popular music scene. John Lydon (Johnny Rotten), a key figure in the birth of this new movement, proclaims on the cover of his autobiography

The Sex Pistols were gaudiness incarnate.
Musical Vaudeville.
Evil burlesque.

Immediately this suggests the central importance of drama and spectacle for punk rock bands. These musicians found their success in affecting their audiences physically, with intensity foreign to their predecessors and as such were successful in their attempts to infiltrate the youth market and jolt the apathetic into action. Indeed, the power of music and theatrical performance to raise public awareness of contemporary events has been put to use by discerning artists for centuries.

Newspaper critics have invariably either vilified or applauded Berkoff's work; after the 1979 debut of *Hamlet*, 'Nick de Jongh of The Guardian was so caustic that Berkoff, half-jokingly, threatened de Jongh's life' (Rosen, I, 14). Indeed, this antipathy exists in the present; with 'hate reviews' emerging particularly after performances of Berkoff's solo show regarding the atrocities of September 11, *Requiem For Ground Zero*. Ian Shuttleworth of The Financial Times believed it was 'staggeringly misconceived in every significant respect' and that 'the single most progressive measure he could take with the 55-minute piece is to remove himself from its performance' (August 20, 2002). Certainly, analysis of autobiographical as well as biographical works makes it increasingly clear that this is a man for whom social and artistic acceptance has been difficult to obtain. Whereas perhaps earlier in his career Berkoff may have delighted in the rejection of more conventional theatrical modes, the present seems to find his scorn directed at the recipients of British arts grants and 'handouts'. Steven Dunne of The Sydney Morning Herald notes, 'he fiercely defends his outsider status: not so much out of the mainstream anymore, but away from the government-subsidised companies in the U.K' (November 1, 1996).

The creation of a dynamic physical theatre, or 'total theatre' (Rosen, VI:1, Currant, 77, Vickers, 347) stems from the inspiration of Antonin Artaud's theories concerning modern drama as well as the influential French mime teachers Jacques Le Coq, Etienne Decroux and Jean Louis Barrault. Their theories support the revelation of a greater sense of 'truth' when all of the actors' tools are utilised through physical as well as verbal expression (Artaud, 69). Unlike conventional theatre where the spoken text is the usual focus of the performance, here the voice is used as an extension of the body, and narrative evolves through any combination of mime, movement, dance, words, circus skills, music, sound effects and visual spectacle, including set design. Thus multiple elements of the human experience are brought into action on the stage, proving the narrative to be far more theatrically and politically efficacious. British author Dominic Dromgoole notes that:

In terms of what has followed his example...he is a waterfall. Much of physical theatre stems from his inspiration and his experiments in the seventies. The whole cockney geezer linguistic richness you find in Jez Butterworth et al., was learnt from the freedom and range Berkoff found in the vernacular in his early work. Verse drama took a new lease of life from his boldness. Storytelling is a more ancient tradition than any one writer, but the joy and drama Berkoff put back in it will have helped later innovators as Conor MacPherson (27).

Indeed, Berkoff is an original and influential 'theatre-maker' continually challenging traditionally accepted notions of what theatre should 'mean' and what social, political, artistic, moral or didactic purposes it should serve.

Continued artistic and financial success for Berkoff is evident in the critical acclaim witnessed in many theatre reviews and the sheer number of 'bums on seats' synonymous with performances from Berkoff's canon. The relevance of his work for audiences outside of Britain relies on the structural similarities inherent in any capitalist based society and also the development of dynamic new presentational forms of drama. In Australia, while literary criticism concentrating specifically on Berkoff is difficult, if not impossible to find, his tours here have been very successful according to corresponding theatre journals and publications. Paula deBurgh, writing for *Theatre Australia* in December, 1981, relates the public's anticipation of Berkoff's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and *Tell Tale Heart* at the 1981/2 Festival of Sydney:

Berkoff needs no introduction to avid theatregoers. His blistering and satirical play *East*, which explodes the raw conflicts of East End life, arrived in a blaze of controversy for the 1978 Adelaide Festival. The then Opposition spokesman for the Arts, Mr. Hill, wanted the 'punk play' cancelled - "If this play is presented, I believe the Adelaide Festival of Arts as a cultural festival will be tarnished for all time" (*Adelaide Advertiser*, 17.11.1977). Nonetheless *East* proved a triumph with local critics, and attracted enthusiastic audiences in four other capital cities (16-7).

Indeed, since the outset of his quest to reveal this provocative dramatic vision in the late 1960's, Berkoff, 'legendary actor, director, playwright, author' has gained a devoted international fan base.

IV. chapter summary

'The tale of blood is not over/ it has only just begun' (*Agamemnon*, 33).

The following three chapters investigate literal, figurative, allegorical, metaphorical and symbolic references to plague, pestilence and pollution in Berkoff's two texts. I will show that his political ideals are made manifest in the written texts, the performance texts (the play as it is performed on stage), various interviews, biographical and autobiographical texts as well as in the breadth and variety of audience response, both immediate (ephemeral) and in retrospect (performance reviews and critical works). It is those considerations regarding the written dramatic texts that I wish to examine in greater detail in the first chapter, entitled *The Berkovian Page - Re-Imaginations*. This is primarily a textual analysis deliberately examined from the point of view of the reader. More from the point of view of the audience is Chapter Two, *The Berkovian Stage - Revelations*; an examination of Berkoff's plays in performance. Here I will engage with the concerns of his theatrical predecessors and examine the restrictive aspects of 'realistic' drama. Chapter Three, *The Berkovian World - Reverberations*, examines the playwright's historical, social and political contexts, investigating the potential efficacy of radical and alternative theatre as well as the possibility of Berkoff's works maintaining their relevance for future audiences.

Chapter # 1. The Berkovian Page: Re-Imaginations

'It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph'.

Edmund Burke (1729-97) attrib.

Walter Kaufmann writes that 'after World War I it became fashionable to contrast our own paltry and unpoetic time with the great ages of the past, lamenting that the modern writer lacked that store of myth on which an Aeschylus and Sophocles could draw' (204-5). Yet writers now have the option of drawing on the store of tragic material given to them by an Aeschylus or a Sophocles, or even a Shakespeare, a Kafka or a Poe, all of whom Berkoff has taken source material from. Where Berkoff aims at an 'analysis of the play rather than a realistic rendering', and further, 'a critical analysis where we performed what was unreal and not perceivable in everyday life' (*Agamemnon*, 6), he tends toward an interpretation ('against the grain') which works for a particular political view. As a committed socialist, Berkoff rewrites Aeschylus and Sophocles in order to expose their potential socialist meanings. In this sense the work recalls much of Brecht's 'rewriting', where he insists that we must go beyond mere empathy with the 'hero' to be able to appreciate not only their tragedy but also that tragedy 'specifically of the plebs' (250).

In both plays, allegories of plague and pestilence hold leadership under a kind of sociopolitical and moral microscope, holding it accountable for the condition of society. While pollution creates an environment in which plague and pestilence can thrive, Berkoff seems to turn his critical gaze toward the cankerous core of humanity, permitting an examination of leadership's responsibility for political ill health as well as the apathy of a working class that allows this contamination to proliferate. It is through iconology and terminology relating to epidemic or fatal disease, metaphorical language and a preference for monologue over dialogue wherein this playwright chooses to expose the perils of a fundamentally polluted society.

1. *Agamemnon*

'What are those cries! This is a cursed house!' (*Agamemnon*, 29).

One could assume *Agamemnon* to be first and foremost about war and the cyclical nature of violence. However, Agamemnon's monologue following his return from the ten-year war in Troy provides a useful insight into the significance of using plague and pollution as a means of expressing larger socio-political concerns:

...her smoking spirals still ascend to heaven/ to mark
this planet's bloody sore/ which painfully we
cauterised/ we lanced the pus from out the boil/ her
perfumed lust and painted glory/ rise in a storm of
ashes (25).

Essentially, these words describe the physical destruction of Troy. However, whilst the reference to Troy being a 'bloody sore' is further enhanced as it is 'cauterised' and its 'pus' is 'lanced', the city is effectively aligned with the image of a plague bubo. Thus plague terminology recommends the physical image of Troy as being the cause of humanity's iniquity, at least from Agamemnon's point of view. Here, the 'pus' is Troy's 'perfumed lust and painted glory', where Agamemnon takes the moral high ground in vilifying pride, falseness, hedonism and debauchery. Ironically, these are all qualities embodied by Agamemnon himself, as we shall see later. Accordingly, these characteristics are presented as pollutants, therefore needing to be purged from society just as the body must be purged of its corruption during infection by plague. The references to fire and ashes also recall the specific iconology of plague in visual art, as the clothes and belongings of a plague victim were traditionally burnt to ensure infection would not be passed on. Thus fire as an image of purification is evoked alongside Clytemnestra's declaration that 'Fire's my sign...Fire travels/ Fire speaks' (18) where fire signifies an end to war, as the Watchman acknowledges 'that sign's code for victory/ a beacon's flare from isle to isle' (13). In contrast with Helen, who is signified by water, Clytemnestra is afforded the qualities of fire in her fiery temper and blistering hate; even her eyes are

described as 'dried up pools' (28), recalling the effects of the sun's scorching heat.

Preceding Agamemnon's death, the chorus express the fears that 'gnaw away like rats tearing at our peace of mind' (27) owing to their monarch's actions during the war. The traditional association of rats with (especially bubonic) plague would seem to suggest doubt as a pestilential force, reinforcing Agamemnon's earlier expression of distaste:

I see from you glaucous blinking stares that cancers
have been grown here/ that may require the knife and
white hot iron/ to purge the body for its good (25).

Thus cancer becomes a metaphor for doubt and dissent within a malcontent society. The botanical meaning of the word glaucous refers to a whitish bloom found on fruit such as grapes, while glaucoma is an affliction of the eye leading to gradual blindness. This immediately broaches ideas of pestilence and disease, conjuring images of a loss of sight or perception and juxtaposed with cancer, a dangerously malignant disease. Whilst cancer is aligned with plague as the 'white hot iron' is introduced as a cathartic implement, the domineering physician's tone adopted by Agamemnon seems to hint at the vulnerability of the masses under absolute authority and the subsequent likelihood of rebellion or revolt.

Despite Agamemnon speaking against the sins of pride and vanity, the Chorus in turn speaks against his callous dealings throughout the war, calling to mind the adage, 'pride comes before a fall'. As the king asks 'why invite envy gossip hate/ invite destruction by the aping of a God?' later reminding his queen 'the sin of pride is high' (26). The words of the Chorus suggests its understanding of his hypocrisy as they align him with Hercules, 'champion of fate'. Just as the pride and vanity of their leader is perceived as a pollutant and pestilential force, images of plague follow as:

...humanity strides on unaware of the germ that grows
within feeding on his vanity/ sucking at his stem of

life/ until one day/ he wakes to see his body plagued
by boils/ pus streaked/ fly blown/ and wishes he had
never been alive at all (27).

Whilst Agamemnon's body slowly rots from within, the innocence (or perhaps naïveté) of his people will be their undoing due to the highly contagious and unprejudiced nature of disease. Thus the mistakes of the leader will by necessity contaminate the people.

Examples of Berkoff's penchant for pestilential themes and his reliance on figurative language may be observed in the climax of the opening monologue; 'A curse is being laid and planned and grown in soil fertilised with heavy blood and silently the curse matures in hate's loathsome brine and shrieks its prayers to the gods' (12). The specific image of curse, used to imply intense hatred and with the conscious intention of causing harm toward another is directed against the entire House of Atreus, which in this part of the trilogy means Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and their three offspring. Botanical language is used in an incongruously 'unnatural' sense; here 'heavy blood' is the fertiliser promoting death rather than new life. Owing to humanity's inability to use power responsibly, it seems nature will always have its revenge; just as the body purges itself during illness, the Earth seems to have a way of ridding itself of pollutants.

Whilst the idea of the curse being a 'seed' in the 'soil' of Thyestes' consciousness, coupled with the complementary impression of its human characteristics as it 'shrieks its prayers to the gods', the word 'silently' suggests a dangerous atmosphere of suppressed fury. As Artaud writes, 'like silent rage, the most terrible plague is one that does not disclose its symptoms' (11), owing to the fact that visible and violent burning pain is often not as deadly as, for example, the silent septicemic variety of bubonic plague. So it seems that what remains unspoken is often more dangerous than what is acknowledged, relating directly to the secret infliction of a curse.

The curse on the house of Atreus by necessity infects all its members, and finds expression in the cycle of bloody deeds within Argos as well as Troy, ensuring the

cyclical theme of retribution through gradual, yet inevitable destruction. In Aeschylus' trilogy, the redefining process of justice is of central importance, whereby the code of law and the assistance of the gods eventually heal the cycle of revenge and hatred. However *Agamemnon* is only the first play of the trilogy, setting up the moral and political scenarios relative to each individual character.

The actor playing Agamemnon (despite enjoying the title role) appears in only a few scenes toward the end of the play; thus the words of his wife and subjects serve to introduce, develop and invite assessment of his character. The first lines given to the Chorus, 'This is Argos/ Argos is a clean city/ this is Agamemnon's city' (12) immediately invite the reader's suspicion, owing to the opening monologue's establishment of the themes of hatred, disease and violence as being produced by a society's figurehead. Entitled 'Legend of Curse', it is written for a single member of the chorus (representing Thyestes) and sets up Argos' atmosphere of pollution through his eyes, placing doubt on the claim that it is a 'clean city'.

Thematically, Berkoff states that his play is about 'heat and battle, fatigue, the marathon and the obscenity of modern and future wars...naturally it is also about the body and its pleasures/ pains' (5). In the treatment of bodily functions, disease, physical violence, frailty and lust, the language is geared to activating the physical senses. Interestingly, the images of sex and violence are constantly aligned. 'Battle One' is a particularly good example of this, whilst 'For Paris and his body's lust/ A mile of sweet young flesh was hacked', the response comes that 'the Trojan boy who kidnapped (Helen) will be paid with thrust for thrust/ Exchange cold steel for rape hard flesh'. The overtly phallic nature of battle and its various weapons is 'driven home' to the reader by the final choric declaration for the scene 'Javelin/ arrow/ spear/ sword/ axe/ cut/ thrust/ tear/ bleed/ hack!' (14). It seems illicit couplings in tragedy tend to invoke violence or death, as illustrated in the adultery of Helen and Paris, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Agamemnon and Cassandra and even the union of Thyestes and Aerope alluded to in the opening monologue.

Whilst Berkoff's *Agamemnon* lacks the excessively 'filthy' language found in his other plays of the late 1970's, highly emotive, anachronistic and bathetic passages provide for much of the play's dramatic intensity. References to 'the giant cheeks of Cyclops' ass' (22), 'warriors...ass-licking for gain' (23), and Aegisthus' threat 'vanish bastards before my whip tears shreds out of your asses' (33), are juxtaposed against images of anachronistic war in 'the hot breath of napalm/...and dumb-dumb shells explode/...and anti missile missile missile/...gleaming bazookas/...that's nuclear scorched' (20). As Aegisthus recalls his father's curse, 'his mind made secret contracts with the Gods/ to plague this house in pain so thick you'll burst' (32-3), the idea of plague being invited by a figure of social significance, and thus having the capacity to elicit blame is made explicitly clear. Additionally, the evocation of pain as the plague boil 'bursts' successfully demonstrates the impermanence of mortal life.

Owing to the fear of what is unknown, the tendency to lay blame in times of catastrophe (like plague times) is common to most cultures. The present is no exception, with AIDS as the new point of focus. Examples of this may be noted in the media as 'Africans, Haitians, prostitutes, drug users, the CIA, monkeys, "bad" lifestyles, the World Health Organisation and homosexuals have each been accused of single-handedly creating or spreading AIDS' (Lamonde, 42).

Clytemnestra's words regarding revenge may be applied equally to her own desire for revenge, the history of the House of Atreus and the wider context of revenge and bloodshed throughout history. Her foreboding of retribution, 'Blood will feed on blood/ The Gods will seek revenge/ They will loathe the eagles glutting Winged beasts/ pinions sticky with blood' (15) recalls once again the image of the eagle. The eagle's biological superiority and its 'strength, speed and soaring flight' is appropriately aligned with the 'supreme' Greek god Zeus (Carr-Gomm, 84). The iconic significance of this image resounds historically as imperial powers such as Ancient Rome, Nazi Germany and the United States of America have adopted the eagle as a political emblem symbolising imperial

power. Incidentally, in the 1970's the U.S.A was an established world power involved in the Vietnam War¹. The parallel between America and Vietnam, Argos and Troy is effectively summed up in the following lines,

out of the sky an eagle dives
and struck at a running hare
ripping the wet blind young from its swollen belly
so Agamemnon ripped open the belly of Troy (15).

Berkoff thus continually reinforces the application of these lasting concerns to a wider social and historical context, as will be discussed in Chapter Three.

II. greek

'...me was the source of all the stink/ the man of principle is a mother fucker' (*Greek*, 182).

While verse may be common to many adaptations of classical plays, Berkoff also plays with anachronism, black comedy and obscene language in order to activate the senses. Regarding his use of language, Annalena McAfee observes that 'the language is visceral, often scatological, and his speeches are perennial favourites among auditioning drama students' (Financial Times, 1996). In *Greek*, references to plague, pestilence and pollution are especially emotive while 'the City sits in a heap of shit' (152) with 'carcasses of rotting football Scots swollen and putrefying on the streets' juxtaposed with images of 'overfat rats not sleek for battle but just good germ carriers with rotten teeth' (153). References to the means of proliferation and physical effects of the *Yersinia Pestis* bacillus assist in signifying a putrid and decaying environment whilst the Thatcherite plague, with its clutches on 'this drab of grey/ this septic isle' (156) promotes fears about pollution's role as the necessary antecedent for epidemic disease.

¹ Interestingly, much important scientific knowledge regarding plague prevention was gathered during this war when thousands of people were infected with the bubonic plague bacillus *Yersinia Pestis* (Boeckl, 2).

Berkoff presents pollution as a profuse and varied influence under Maggot Scratcher's government, where forces conducive to pestilence comprise of sexual repression, domestic violence, artistic compromise and racial hatred. The frustration and discontent latent in the female half of society finds verbal expression in the words of the Sphinx as she says, 'you need your mothers you mother fucker, to love is to enslave a woman to turn her into a bearing cow to produce cannon fodder to go on killing' (169). This is further reinforced in the scenes of domestic unhappiness as 'whack and zunk goes mum and splatter back hand crack goes dad', illustrating how hatred and oppression begins on a domestic scale and will in due course infect a nation. As Mum says, 'and up and down the length and breadth the straps are out and babies, bairns and kids are straightened out, lashed out, whipped and made to obey', suggesting the recurrent nature of hatred and ignorance as it recycles itself throughout each generation whilst 'the nation's full of perverts if you ask me/ the plague still flourishes mate' (178).

As well as the Sphinx being emblematic for wisdom in classical antiquity (Carr-Gomm, 203) here she is the embodiment of frustration and anger, her feminine rage directed against the stupidity of men blind to their own mistakes. As she says to Eddy,

...you pollute the earth/ every footstep you take rots
what's underneath/ you turn the seas to dead lakes
and the crops are dying from the plague that is man/
you are the plague.

Here, medical aspects of plague relating to human bodies are transferred to a more sweeping vision of plague associated with man's destruction of nature. Further, she says, 'You make your weapons to give you the strength that you lack/ you enslave whip beat and oppress' (168), aligning plague with the tradition of patriarchal oppression. In this sense the Sphinx seems not to represent evil (despite her penchant for eating people) as she seeks first to enlighten rather than merely to destroy.

Sexual repression is made manifest in Wife's monologue as she notes 'lovers are afraid to stroke each other's groins lest new laws against the spreading of the plague outlaw them' (167). This recalls such measures as may be observed in historical accounts of bubonic plague where 'sexual abstinence (was) routinely prescribed' (Boeckl, 15). Also, the proliferation of 'masturbating shops' as they 'line every High Street' provides a parallel with the proliferation of plague. The idea of 'sperm as germ' aligns sexuality with society's internal rot as 'the pneumatic drill of strong right wrists ensures a girl a fat living, the country's awash in spunk not threshing and sweetening the wombs of lovers but crushed in Kleenex and dead in cubicles with red lights' (167). Thus it seems 'whore-generated' sperm is the strangely fruitless outcome of a sexually prohibited society.

Interestingly, the idea of curse within *Greek* does not relate specifically to the concept of inherited guilt. As in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, the disastrous events that occur are not an infliction of punishment so much as the unfortunate effects of a life lived in innocence and ignorance of its true identity. The prediction of the oracle (in this case a fortuneteller at an Easter fair) is treated with suspicion; however, measures are taken in both cases to avoid a 'violent death for this son's father and...a bunk-up with his mum' (*Greek*, 148). In this sense individual pollution inflicted by a curse is seemingly random, unrelated to the concept of divine justice or retribution.

Consistent efforts and successes in his quest to cure the plague promote Eddy as an effective vaccine rather than the dread carrier of pestilential disease. The ten years that pass before the beginning of 2.1 see Eddy and his 'sweet mate' make 'the city golden era time' (165), as they cure 'the plague by giving inspiration to our plates/ came rich by giving more and taking less' (166). Owing to the arbitrary nature of the curse inflicted upon him, and his 'non-fatalistic disposition' (142), he is free to make his own moral judgements, demanding of his wife/mother 'Why should I tear my eyes out Greek style, why should you hang yourself' (183). Here Eddy becomes an icon of progressive thought, as this ending

'with a twist' allows Berkoff to challenge the absolute authority invested in organised religion and thus its role in reinforcing dominant ideologies. Interestingly, in this text notions of material wealth among the lower classes are frequently allied with racially prejudiced social outlooks. Thus as Eddy's accomplishments promote him beyond the ranks of the lower classes in his plague-ridden environment, so he is raised above a pestilential lower class mentality based on jealousy and dissatisfaction. Berkoff seems to suggest here that even if an individual can elevate him or herself, they can not always hope to elevate others; life is a personal progression spurred on by positivity and drive yet hampered by the blight of apathy and suspicion. This recalls Eddy's opening monologue where 'lazy bastards wondered why at the end of a life of skiving and strikes Moisha down the road copped a few bob or why the Cypriots had a big store full of goodies not that pathetic shit heap down our street' (147). In refusing to accept that he alone is responsible for 'the British plague that cements...heads and puts vitriol inside...hearts' (178) Eddy has freed himself to continue his heroic works, getting rid of 'sloth and stale achievement' (165) and the 'illness of inertia' as 'armed killers snipe from the shattered eyes of buildings and death stalks in the foul and pestilent breath of friends whose eyes are drunk with envy and greed at your success' (167).

Indeed, under the miasmic cloud of the IRA pub bombings and widespread political strife as 'parties of all shades battle for power to sort the shit from the shinola' (152), widespread attitudes of intolerance provide a breeding ground for plague. For example, immediately preceding Eddy's ride 'in peace to London's airport skidrow alone and reflective in (his) thoughts ... some Paki in the carriage (gets) a right kicking for some no doubt vile offence like inadvertently catching the eye of some right gallant son of Tottenham' (156). A chorus of 'Rule Britannia' is then sung, reinforcing the notion of hypocrisy, racial disharmony and physical violence being pollutants and thus inviting pestilential disease. Opposing extremist views are pitted against each other as the various parties within Britain paradoxically 'call for violence to put an end to violence' (152) while the 'screaming advocates of limited nuclear drop on Hyde Park' assemble in order to

'rid the country they say of a twisted bunch of rancid and perverted filth' (153). As 'the violence upon which the state and its civilization rest' is brought 'into visibility, for those who want to see' (Sinfield, 35), the internal contradictions in and between the subcultures is seen to threaten their potential to instigate social or political change.

As Berkoff's personal 'gripes' encroach on the text, the specific targets of his satirical attacks are clearly identified. Artistic compromise is seen as a pollutant as Dad narrates the Pied Piper style march of the rats while they head toward the National Theatre to 'try to wake the theatre rats who have been long in coma from a deadly attack of nightly brainwash' (153). According to Rosen, 'Berkoff enjoys such opportunities to "slap down" the established British theatre companies, especially the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal National Theatre, as he holds them personally responsible for what he considers to be the poor state of British theatre' (IV.3). This would indeed seem true, as Berkoff reiterates in an interview with Sheridan Morley of *The Sunday Times*, 'if you're responsible for selling seats without a comfortable Arts Council grant, as we were in the beginning, then you're really on your own and you have to go out there and stun them every night which is the best possible training' (1977). Thus Berkoff seems to suggest that 'comfortable' material circumstances are often a precursor to safe, boring or 'half-assed' theatre. More importantly, government employees driven to reinforce dominant ideologies in order to preserve their own interests have the power to delegate these grants, thus perpetuating non-progressive theatrical traditions.

While Eddy seeks to 'rid the world of half-assed bastards' (166), 'attacking all that he finds polluted' (141), the irony is of course his realisation that he is 'the rotten plague' (83). However, Berkoff's protagonist is a progressive hero, deciding to 'amend the woes of (his) own fair state' (157) owing to his 'detestation of the degrading environment he inherited' (141). The polluted, murderous and disease-ridden social context make Eddy's patricide and incestuous love appear almost inconsequential in comparison, which allows one

to question whether values and morals might simply exist to reinforce dominant ideologies. His plea in the final scene offers a feasible excuse for his actions, 'do we cause each other pain, do we kill each other, do we maim and kill, do we inflict vicious wounds on each other (?)'. Despite killing a man in ignorance of their biological relationship, Eddy's victim is presented as an ineffectual neo-Nazi, prone to domestic violence and embodying those distasteful qualities that compound the problem of the country's polluted environs.

Through Eddy's anguish 'We only love so it doesn't matter mother...it's better than shoving a stick of dynamite up someone's ass and getting a medal for it' (183), the reader is offered a markedly alternative humanitarian point of view that overrides traditional moral 'standards'. Berkoff seems to be saying that while patricide and incest are not traditionally accepted as morally or ethically correct behaviour, Eddy's campaign to end the British plague is the ultimate imperative. As Betty Caplan observes, 'the play's message is a curious one: Cleveland needn't have worried - incest apparently is O.K' (1988). Thus Berkoff's rewriting of Aeschylus and Sophocles reflects a desire to alter received notions of morality and even normality in an attempt to identify the true carriers of social disease and disorder; in this case an ethically polluted government and a correspondingly apathetic lower class.

Chapter # 2. The Berkovian Stage: Revelations

'Actors walk a tightrope between great art and crap'.

Steven Berkoff - *Shakespeare's Villains*, 2001.

Berkoff manipulates our capacity for physical sensation in order to tap into our emotional and intellectual faculties. In this way his theatre is like a plague, initially and most obviously affecting the physical body, but having a subversive impact on the mind. Because Western theatre has tended to privilege the intellectual response over the sensory, audiences have learnt to expect safe performances that continually reinforce their ideological securities, thus perpetuating hierarchical social structures and legitimating capitalist domination. The theory of Antonin Artaud poses the idea that theatre is comparable to plague in their mutual powers of revelation, transformation and the fact that both are potentially refining social phenomena. Also, Artaud's idea that 'above all we must agree stage acting is a delirium like the plague, and is communicable' (18) helps to illustrate the potential for efficacy in the physical aspects of performance.

In this chapter I will discuss the physical manifestations of plague, pestilence and pollution in the staging of the plays, the 'bodies', the sets and the physical production of Berkoff's performance texts - examining how his often stylised and aggressive approach to the spoken word might impact on an audience. Looking to Artaud's belief that 'an image, an allegory, a form disguising what it means to reveal has more meaning to the mind than the enlightenment brought about by words or their analysis' (53), also suggests ways in which physical and vocal manifestations of disease might promote a physical and subsequently efficacious impact on an audience.

I.theatre as plague

'...and Zeus laughed and laughed and spat out deadly gasses from his guts/ and men collapsed like flies/ heaved out their entire wet insides' (*Agamemnon*, 20).

Theatre and plague affect individual bodies and they in turn can upset the body politic. Via plague buboes, the body is enabled to expel its inner putrefaction just as volcanoes rid the earth of its 'pus'. And just as volcanoes have their designated places along the faultlines of the earth, buboes have their designated places on the body around the lymph nodes and glands. Following this train of thought, if society was to have a cathartic site, surely that site must be the arts, and particularly the fundamentally political platform of the stage. Indeed, for Berkoff as for the specific dramatic predecessors discussed here, the stage allows for oppositional performance having the capacity for 'debate, discussion, socio-political proposals and recommendations' (Kershaw, 5). This may be observed in both *Agamemnon* and *Greek*, where the allegorical form links the local to current national and international misuses of power, increasing the chances for shifts in the public's ideological position. Also, following the idea that an actor's performance should be a 'delirium like the plague', any significant social or political action presented on stage should affect the audience's sensibility like an epidemic as it exposes all the violence and corruption of which a human being is capable.

Indeed, both plague and theatre impel us to see ourselves 'as we really are' particularly by 'making the masks fall and divulging our world's lies, aimlessness, meanness and even two-facedness' (Artaud, 22). With plague this means calling attention to our mortality; with theatre it may mean either moving beyond a reliance on dialogue, hackneyed themes or clichéd theatrical forms that perpetuate dominant ideologies. *Pace* Brecht, Berkoff attempts to 'destroy existing, oppressive social and economic structures by empowering his audiences with the belief that their own actions could change the course of history' (Green, 22). In this way Berkoff's avoidance of the strict moral judgements normally

associated with incest (arguably still one of the most abhorred sexual 'deviations' of the Western world) impels the audience to identify with and see Eddy for what he 'really is'. Hence Berkoff's provision that our 'hero' Eddy in is 'at heart an ordinary young man with whom many I know will find identification' (*Greek*, 143).

Akin to the idea of 'making the masks fall' is the idea that both plague and theatre are capable of destroying the veneer of civilization, revealing the realities beneath and returning humanity to an instinctual state in which it lacks predetermined constructions of morality, discipline and order; all forms of societal 'control'. In this way, control may be subverted by both theatre and plague. Additionally, beneath control swirls the cesspool of the *id*, that subconscious source of desire and mystery Artaud seeks to tap for a sensory experience of the theatre. Colin Russell believes that this is 'perhaps exactly what Artaud desires - the casting off of the yoke of submission to personal and social control, the release of the body from the control of the intellect, the spontaneous responsiveness of the deepest core of the self to an experience of theatre which delves far below mere aesthetic appreciation and has nothing to do with moral edification' (3). For Berkoff, the strength of theatre lies in 'making a greater comment on the person from a distance, from a height' as he clarifies further 'in a way acting is sort of stripping off the kind of "veneer" and stripping it down and looking at the mechanics and that's far more exciting, far more thrilling, because it illuminates'. While 'naturalism as an art form' seems to have become 'fairly dead' (Berkoff in Rosen, VII, 3) owing to its inability to dig further than the surface, it seems the appeal of non-realistic dramatic forms is due to its breadth of focus.

Images of humanity in the thrall of forces beyond its control imply that plague and pestilence in *Greek* and *Agamemnon* stem from the oppressive elements of a thoroughly entrenched hegemony. Through emulating Artaud, Berkoff presents us with the fact that we are dying, or rather, his productions work by making us aware that we are in danger of succumbing to our apathy and slothfulness. If we

are dying from mediocrity, materialism and the environmental, political, moral and ethical pollution that envelops us, Berkoff makes it very clear that 'this is our own fault'. In particular, we must be confronted with our mortality; we must not deny it, or the prospect of extinction due to laziness and disinterest will become a reality.

As 'theatre...urges the mind on to delirium which intensifies its energy' (Artaud, 22), the purgation of laziness and disinterest is far more probable, as akin to the plague, theatre works by draining pustules. For Berkoff it should be a revenging and redeeming scourge, capable of inciting positive social change and wiping out pollution. Where Berkoff presents images such as 'the staring eyes of kids/ how one is burnt by fag ends/ others punched black and blue/ screams in the night' (*Greek*, 177) the subsequently heightened emotional state experienced by the individual would encourage opposition to instances of social and moral pollution. Indeed, in a social sense, Berkoff's plays have the ability to upset our sensual tranquility, release the discontentment of our repressed subconscious, thus driving us to potential rebellion whereby negative attributes may be converted into positive social action.

II. berkoff's theatrical roots

'I walked through the plague rot streets and witnessed the old and the broken...'
(*Greek*, 182).

Like his predecessors in the field of physical theatre, Berkoff aims to 'infect audiences' through an absolute cathartic experience for the mind and body. Whilst he complains that owing to naturalism, theatre has 'moved away from illumination to deception' (*Gambit*, 12), his aesthetic draws from a number of theatre traditions from the non-realistic vein in order to proceed beyond a traditional dramatic obsession with the purely psychological. In terms of how overtly Berkoff's predecessors influence his work, he has said:

I think you know you find associations with other people that sort of confirm what you are doing. You can talk about Brecht, or anybody, Artaud or Barrault, but they're kind of elements that are you know, grist to your mill. You kind of use it to explore, but basically when you're doing anything you don't have a particular technique...(you) don't have the same kind of basic written and documented techniques as exists say in painting - fauvists against the cubists against the impressionists...(Berkoff in Rosen, VII, 2).

Conversely, I would argue that Berkoff uses his influences as more than simply 'grist to his mill'; rather his engagement with the theory of Brecht, Le Coq and especially Artaud is often quite transparent. An examination of particular strategies initiated by these artists will thus help to illuminate aspects of Berkoff's Aesthetic. Additionally, I have included Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque as it may shed light on depictions of plague, pestilence and pollution in *Agamemnon* and *Greek*.

In using actors to purposefully represent characters rather than become them and adopting the idea of witnesses by keeping all the actors on stage throughout, Berkoff's work recalls elements of Brechtian Epic Theatre. This paradox, whereby the actor identifies with a character, yet creates distance between the characters emotional journey and the weight of his or her actions, provides a more objective analysis and thus less opportunity for bias. In addition, Berkoff proclaims his adherence to Brechtian ideals when he says,

All verbal communication is a form of acting. The telling of an event is to possess the event inside you. A person recalling an accident is acting out the event...the actor is a witness for information he sees and the thoughts of the writer and he must filter them clearly through his observations (*Gambit*, 8-9).

This would be particularly evident in the opening monologue of *Agamemnon* as the actor, following Berkoff's lead in the writing of the piece, describes the event 'as if it had happened to (him)' (*Agamemnon*, 5). As the monologue is written initially in the first person, 'I am the feast they feast on', and then in the third person as 'his lips stretch/ expose a smile' (11-12), there exists the

possibility for objective detachment. Through the manipulation of time and perspective, the cast is enabled to remain on stage throughout, for example in Battle Two where the first five lines have Clytemnestra '*watching*', the second four lines have Agamemnon speaking '*from the battle*' and the next two sections have the chorus speaking '*in present*' and then '*in past*' (15). Thus the concept of witnesses becomes a visible dramatic mechanism.

The physical language of the body and its capacity for expressiveness over and above words alone has fascinated numerous theatre practitioners from non-realistic schools of thought. Jacques Le Coq's theories of mime, movement, masks, clowning and ensemble have been particularly useful to the development of Berkoff's aesthetic. Berkoff studied with Le Coq over a period of two years, where he learnt to experiment with a range of performance techniques contributing to physical dynamism. Le Coq's understanding of the nature of gesture and movement on the stage promoted the idea of being acutely aware of the relationship between the gestures used and the words spoken. In this way the physical language of the body becomes almost scientific or mathematical. In comedy for example, an actor is able to call upon (and then break where necessary) a set of rules regarding repetition and timing.

Looking to Le Coq's theories may also help to cultivate an appreciation of the political implications of physical movement. The principle of perpetual motion became for Le Coq a political statement as 'the acceptance of constant movement flies in the face of all conservative dogmatism because it acknowledges that nothing is fixed, and it leads to the development of tolerance' (Simon McBurney quoted in Jenkins, 4). Le Coq worked as a physical education instructor, then in a theatre group in France that expressed its opposition to the Nazi occupation through displays of dance, pantomime and gymnastics, then teaching physical therapy in Germany where he likes to think he:

... helped a little in the de-Nazification of Germany...I tried out a relaxation exercise which consisted of lifting the arm and letting it drop. I found that their

way of doing the gesture was stiffer and different from ours, so I taught them to loosen up!' (*The Moving Body*, 7).

Certainly, the development of tolerance is an admirable didactic goal in this era of nuclear warfare and religious extremism.

Berkoff's introductory and explanatory passages very often echo the Artaudian style of expression and thought. Indeed, Antonin Artaud's theories regarding a 'Theatre of Cruelty' find overt expression in Berkoff's work in the rejection of traditional theatre practices and the use of actors as 'human sacrifices' upon the stage, thus creating ritualistic theatre. In the late 1960's he understood 'text, sound and gesture' as a means of 'creating the cruellest and most powerful theatrical scenario even when based on a realistic theme' (*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, 9), revealing the specific importance of cruelty and visceral power upon Berkoff's stage. Announcing the desire to 'be a sacrifice and live dangerously... what is vital to the spectator is your core, the inner part of you' (*Gambit*, 8), Berkoff betrays the influence of Artaud's conviction that in 'the anguished, catastrophic times we live in, we feel an urgent need for theatre that is not overshadowed by events, but arouses deep echoes within us' (Artaud, 64). Certainly, the ritualistic and cruel aspects of Artaud's theatre recalls a kind of 'deep echo' reminiscent of disembowelment, relating also to the cathartic nature of plague as it purges the body of its inner decay.

Artaud wanted 'to make theatre a believable reality inflicting a kind of laceration, contained in all true feeling, on the heart and senses', where 'the audience will believe in the illusion of theatre on condition they really take it for a dream, not for a servile imitation of reality' (65). Berkoff makes it plain that he has followed the same principle in the Producer's Note to *Agamemnon*, 'What we attempted in the following plays was a grotesque, surreal, paranoiac view of life such as is conjured up in dreams...the schizoid personality of man as he undoubtedly is...and the staging took on this manner in its exaggerated and enlarged forms' (6). Examples of this paranoiac, dream-like vision are found in Eddy's 'reverie' in *Greek*, involving 'a dozen pussies on a bed nestled between

some soft and squeezy thighs' (156) and Clytemnestra's eloquent descriptive passages regarding her husband's adultery in *Agamemnon*; 'she couldn't wait could she/ the dried blood still on you/ not even waiting to wash it off' (27). Berkoff's attempts to engage with 'man as he undoubtedly is', rather than shying away from what might be considered somewhat 'risqué' subject matter, are thus inflicted on the audience's sensibilities.

With *Agamemnon*, Berkoff and the London Theatre Group deliberately set out to adapt or modify already existing material, which recalls cultural materialist concerns. Through the acknowledgement of literature's role in perpetuating and legitimating the status quo, themes of plague, pestilence and pollution are employed as a vehicle for exposing social ills. According to his Producer's Note, in searching for material for these plays Berkoff 'found the finished play too finite a form, simply a mass of dialogue, with no resonances of inner life, where the actors hurled situational chat at each other'. Already the desire to move away from more contemporary theatrical forms is evident, and he continues 'far more inspiration came from the short story form, or classic text, which gave the whole situation, the inner and outer life and subjective thought of the characters' (*Agamemnon*, 6). It would thus appear that Berkoff's understanding of and leaning toward *non*-realism stipulates a focus on the inner life of a character, their primal emotions, sensual impulses and hidden desires. Additionally, this shows his interest in discovering ways of revealing the 'total' human experience as opposed to direct imitation or superficial verisimilitude. Thus, the difference between a 'total' theatre and a theatre of 'verisimilitude' lies in the former's commitment to uncovering every possible facet including the unconscious/ subconscious meanings of the written text, whereas the latter has its focus on 'copying' the more external aspects of life as it is presented on stage.

Berkoff may appropriate other production styles and adapt the work of other playwrights, yet the resulting pastiche is recognisably his own. This is pertinent in considering the reworking of Sophocles and Aeschylus, in which he 'readily

acknowledges that, as a director, he does not set out to produce literal reproductions of texts on-stage... rarely (relying) solely on the (playwright's) intent, preferring to use the text to communicate his own ideas' (Rosen, 1, 7). He goes on to say that 'what we sought for was a critical analysis where we performed what was unreal and not perceivable in everyday life, and expressed drama less through impersonation than through revelation, hoping that a greater degree of reality would be shown by these methods' (*Agamemnon*, 6). The idea of presenting an analysis rather than a faithfully realistic interpretation of a play assists Berkoff in moving further away from a numbing realism that can only mirror a conscious world.

Ideally, an affective theatre of this sort would be aimed at our primordial instincts and responsiveness through ritual, spectacle and magic. In this way Berkoff's theatre may be aligned with Mikhael Bakhtin's idea of carnival, especially where the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privilege, norms and prohibitions characterizes the occasion in social terms. Bakhtin's theory that 'all were considered equal during carnival... (as it is) the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter' (17), thus feeds into Berkoff's use of satire and the liberating force of laughter as a key constituent in impressing socio-political ideas upon his audiences. Furthermore, 'carnival's delight in the excessive and the grotesque, its wild mimicry of the normal in order to reveal its basic absurdity, is at root a satiric impulse' (Kershaw, 81). Recalling that drama has its origins in the sacred where previous civilizations believed that the gods were invoked and placated when their actions were re-enacted, it seems a return to ritualised forms may be the key to heightening the potential impact of contemporary works.

It now seems customary for radical performance practitioners to manipulate our sensibility in order to influence our emotion and intellect. As David Edgar notes,

What I suppose most of us (radical theatre workers) are striving for, is a way of combining the cerebral, unearthly detachment of Brecht's theory with the all too earthy, sensual, visceral experience of Bakhtin's

carnival, so that in alliance these two forces can finally defeat the puppeteers and manipulators of the spectacle (245).

The idea of laughter being linked to the 'lower bodily stratum' as it 'degrades and materialises' is useful to Berkoff's art as it feeds on the connection between humans and the earth. Bakhtin notes 'to degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better' (19). This fusion of the bodily concerns of Bakhtin with the intellectual concerns of Brecht thus seems to provide a site for resistance to traditional Western theatrical forms and thematic fixations.

III. berkoff's appropriation of the spoken word

**'What's self-determination mate? Do you know what the fuck it means? You just shove big words down your throat like when mum gave you medicine...'
(Sink the Belgrano!, 153).**

Jessica Winter believes that:

... always commanding, often repellent, Berkoff the performer is also something of a bully. His technical mastery is dazzling, but he can't resist unleashing it at maximum volume with every breath. He bowls over not only the audience but the text itself... The best and worst that can be said of Berkoff is that when he's on stage, there's no room for anyone or anything else' (73).

The idea that Berkoff 'bowls over' or 'outperforms' the actual words he speaks during performance raises questions as to the significance of the written text. In order to 'restore an impassioned convulsive concept of life to theatre' (Artaud, 81), it would seem that Berkoff has taken up the call for more heightened forms of feeling, thus transcending traditionally accepted notions of what drama should be. In these instances, the 'performance text' becomes as powerful and important as the written text.

Certainly, Steven Berkoff's aggressive approach to performance may be observed on numerous planes, with the result that his work in print and on stage divides

critics into extreme polar opposites. As Alastair Macaulay proclaims 'it is now many years since Berkoff became the derided British archetype of a certain kind of flashy bad acting: all selfish surface and never a moment of serious involvement in anything beyond his own ego' and that 'Berkoff has always presented himself as a mega-Thesp' (1998). Thus he is interpreted as lacking in talent, while his arguably egocentric approach to production alienates critical response and even those in his production teams, including the actors. Interestingly, another of Berkoff's influences is recalled here in Vsevolod Meyerhold, the man from whom 'true directorial megalomania might be said to have sprung' (Gilman, 34). Meyerhold's revolutionary stance toward classic texts included an advocacy of 'free-for-all directorial indulgence' where the original text was rearranged and performed in the 'vigorous, athletic style he called biomechanics' (Green, 21-2) in order to create viable and relevant art in the theatre.

Whilst committed to advancing the cause of anti-realistic theatre, Berkoff retains the goal of 'truthfulness' in performance. 'Truth' on Berkoff's stage is presented through a combination of monologue, broken dialogue, mime, abstract vocal sounds, choreographed movement, use of a chorus, song, asides, gesture, facial expression, filmic techniques, such as the distortion of pace, as well as the thoughtful use of silence and stillness. Both words and visuals are inseparable components of Berkoff's theatre, incorporating the expressive potential of the body with his often aggressive and stylized use of language in an attempt to offer a greater degree of verity. This may be observed in performances of *Greek* and *Agamemnon*, as they rely heavily on the combined elements of spectacle and proclamation, wherein the expression of each character's particular worldview is presented to the audience for appraisal. The focus seems consistently to rest on the individual, as Berkoff's technique of juxtaposing monologues in preference to lengthy sections of dialogue allows the undivided attention of the audience to rest upon each 'body' in isolation. For example, the entirety of the first scene of *Greek* belongs to Eddy in a monologue of over 100 lines. Performed directly to the audience, the actor portraying this role is allowed the full concentration of

the collective imaginations of the audience as he reveals the social discourses, domestic relationships and physical environments that have shaped his present consciousness.

Indeed, the relationship between language and Berkoff's 'full' aesthetic is a complicated one, as the central importance of words for any playwright must be balanced by his desire to tap into the communicative power of the body. Also, despite Berkoff's anti-realistic stance, his aim is to simply 'be' the character, yet this is overtly stylized acting; performance that is a travesty of itself. In *Agamemnon*, Berkoff says that

...the final text evolved after a long workshop series during which the actors turned themselves into athletes, soldiers, horses and chorus. The text was chanted, spoken, sung, and simply acted (*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, 77).

This movement beyond a traditional dependence on dialogue suggests that if a piece is 'simply acted' it is perhaps less significant than a drama that integrates alternate vocal modes of expression.

Ironically, all dissident thought and expression must exist within the ideological constructs that control our individual subjectivity as well as our ideas. Owing to the role language and other meaning-making systems play in perpetuating social and cultural domination within a particular society, a transgressive theatre such as Berkoff's must find a way to overcome these constraints. Regarding the way in which language functions, Alan Sinfield points out '...if we come to consciousness within a language that is continuous with the power structures that sustain the social order, how can we conceive, let alone organize, resistance?' (*Faultlines*, 35). It would seem that Berkoff's goal is illumination or revelation of the text where a preference for critical presentation rather than simple theatrical illusion allows for an exploration of the 'essence' of a role rather than the mere presentation of superficial character choices. If one is able to distort the written

text of a play through its performance, the potential is created for an examination of the social structures in which subjectivity exists.

Alternatively, Artaud believes 'there is no question of abolishing speech in theatre but of changing its intended purpose, especially to lessen its status, to view it as something other than a way of guiding human nature to external ends...' (53). Berkoff manages to change the 'intended purpose' of words as he gives them the physical qualities capable of destruction. Tracing his sensitivity of the power of language to his youth, Berkoff reminisces in an interview with *The Financial Times*,

I remember older chaps who were very articulate and very funny. They'd use all kinds of verbal monstrosities to express things; even make up their own language. You could be *demolished* with words, and you had to fight back with words (*Interview*, 1991, p. 5).

This recalls the fight scene in 1,5 of *Greek* where Eddy 'verbal(s) to death' his 'real pop' (181-2), the fight scene of Battle One in *Agamemnon* where the 'Two Brave Soldiers' kill each other with their mutual words of pain, and even Eddy's demolishing of *Greek's* Sphinx with words as he solves her riddle, thus enabling him to physically cut off her head.

IV. berkoff's reliance on physical expression

'She became with me a fun palace in which almighty raging Technicolour and panoramic skin-flicks and three-act dramas would be enacted...' (*East*, 16).

Reinforcing the importance of violence as a theatrical device, Berkoff also emphasises the non-verbal qualities of spectacle, mime, dance and physical theatre. He uses theatrical conventions such as music, lighting and sound effects, costume, make-up, the use of masks and ensemble playing to great effect; while his utilisation of the chorus as a symbol of the social and physical environment is indubitably anti-realistic. Precisely choreographed mime and gesture, combined

with a sometimes stilted and distorted vocal delivery assist in 'lacerating' the audience as significantly as do the material aspects of the staging. Alastair MacAuley charges that Berkoff 'is the worst mime artist since Marcel Marceau: he accompanies most Shakespearean sentences with a minimum of six different gestures, all over-emphatic and most of them delivered several times' (1999). Conversely, Sheridan Morley notes, 'what he brings back to the West End, however, is a real sense of menace and manic energy, and it is hugely welcome in an otherwise rather bland season' (1993). It is this menace and manic energy that contributes to an 'assault' on the audience's sensibilities, in the same manner as a Sex Pistols concert or a voodoo ceremony might physically affect their onlookers.

As Berkoff moulds an acting company to create within his aesthetic, he manages to apply his own performance style to the given dramatic text, proving his performance style to be flexible through its adaptability. According to the playwright, the actors of the London Theatre Group are 'welded together by a common purpose' relating particularly to the theories of Le Coq as they attempt to 'express drama in the most vital way imaginable: to perform at the height of one's power with all available means... (especially) through the spoken word, gesture, mime and music' (*Agamemnon*, 6). Berkoff demands precise control of body and voice from his actors, taking them through as rigorous an audition process as time may permit. As Berkoff's goal is to connect the body with the mind, the focus lies in allowing an audience to actually feel the intense emotions manufactured on stage. An effective theatre for Berkoff is therefore an affective one.

Assisting the development of the viewer's appreciation of each individual character is the absence of scenic clutter often found on the Realistic or Naturalistic stage. In juxtaposing minimal sets with sometimes overtly theatrical costumes, lighting and masks, the visual focus remains on the actor. As Berkoff maintains 'I believe that you don't need anything more than just utter simplicity and that everything in my art must be created from the body onwards...the body

and the voice' (Interview, Japanese Television; *Salomé* videotape, British Theatre Museum, 1990). The stage setting throughout *Greek* consists merely of a 'kitchen table and four simple chairs' which can be 'everything one wants them to be', and the further elimination of props is enforced as Berkoff insists that 'all other artifacts are mimed or suggested' (*Greek*, 144). Thus the success of such passages relies upon the actor's skills rather than the incorporation of superfluous visual 'decoration'.

Visual elements of this theatre are surprisingly stark, with the primary palette of many productions being an assortment of blacks, whites, and greys hearkening to Japanese Kabuki, German Expressionism and Meyerhold's Constructivism as well as the classical Greek Theatre. He abolishes colour on stage, believing it to give one 'too many opportunities to be indecisive' as 'black and white is more dynamic and colours can interfere unless they have a purpose, a point' (Berkoff in Rosen, VII,8). With *Greek*, Berkoff stipulates that it be 'staged simply in the usual stripped-down style I would, for want of a better term, call functionalist' (*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, 139). Berkoff has made his aversion to clutter on stage very clear, 'every prop used in theatre in some way diminishes the role of the performer, it takes away from his art' (Berkoff in Rosen, III, 9). This minimalistic visual approach is aimed at concentrating audience focus on the actor rather than the set. Because clutter has the capacity to create misunderstanding, the aim should be to create simple, direct physical actions in order to affect an audience Berkoff perceives as 'zombies', trapped in a society 'in which an emotional plague (has) taken root' (*Greek*, 141).

Utilisation of a chorus on Berkoff's stage hearkens back to the Greek theatre from which the two plays in question originated. Also, in terms of Berkoff's personal background, the idea of a chorus stems from the material conditions in which he learnt to create, as he says in an interview in 1998, 'a lot of your amusement is in each other... the stimulus and response you have between your colleagues and that's where you get a kind of pecking order...working yourself up until you've got yourself into more of a kind of a position in the society'. The

belief that 'the group creates much more' is strong in Berkoff, as is the idea that 'you've got to have fun...to make it a kind of Bacchanalian rite'. In acknowledging his social background, he remembers 'I found that the group was always a bit more exciting' and that 'I think in working class people, the lower you are on the economic scale, the larger is the pack in which you move' (Berkoff in Rosen, VII, 5-6). This sense of solidarity is evident in the various production photographs of *Agamemnon*, as the mutual ownership of movement and rhythm binds the actors together.

Regarding the importance of the musical 'score', Berkoff believes that while the text is a fixed entity during performance, the music will motivate and stimulate the language. Thus the subtext remains flexible and ever changing because 'the music is your unconscious mind' (Berkoff in Rosen, VII, 9). For the 1976 production of *Agamemnon*, 'David Toop and Paul Burwell created the music and welded themselves into the action like a cunning embroidery, constantly stimulating and inspiring' (*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, 77). Thus the musical score directly influences the written and performance texts. It is interesting to note that the culture of today, particularly youth culture, relies heavily on musical stimuli. Dance clubs, raves, drugs, parties; indeed most social events are defined largely by the specific choice of music played. The considerable impact of music upon the body seems due to the tangible link between the beat (or rhythm) and the constant collective drive of the human heartbeat (or pulse).

Interestingly, in the staging of *Greek*, Berkoff stipulates that the faces of the four actors 'are painted white and are clearly defined', thus evoking the use of masks in Greek classicism, but having greater similarities with the traditional 'whiteface' of mimes and clowns. *Greek's* employment of caricature is further reinforced as Berkoff suggests that 'movement should be sharp and dynamic, exaggerated and sometimes bearing the quality of seaside cartoons' (144). This allows for a demonstrative and supposedly unbiased attitude from the actor toward the character they are playing, recalling Brecht's theories of 'alienation'.

It seems that when shaken by the fear of death, humankind will seek escape, redemption or immortality. Like plague, the cathartic site of the arts urges the mind on to realise its hidden strength, thus urging humankind to 'take a nobler, more heroic stand in the face of destiny than they would have assumed without it' (Artaud, 22). As audiences of Western theatre are compelled to accept a distinctly passive role which Berkoff sees as leading to a general atmosphere of complacency and sterility, one could thus argue that the damage wrought by naturalistic or psychological theatrical forms has maintained us in a kind of intellectual coma. Looking at the conflict between man's intellectual and physical natures, Berkoff thus seems to be aiming to shock his audiences from their self-satisfaction and send them out with a renewed sense of the vitality and authenticity absent from their daily lives. The call for more heightened and intensified forms of feeling and thus for living may very well find expression on the stage. For these reasons, in Chapter Three I will inquire into the durability of Berkoff's techniques and themes in an attempt to gauge their dissident potential for future audiences.

Chapter #3. The Berkovian World: Reverberations

'But this is his evening as star/author/director, and once again it is a highly acrobatic nightmare of social disease and disorder'.

Sheridan Morley - *The Spectator*, September 24, 1994.

It seems that whilst *Agamemnon* has a more obvious potential to retain its full relevance for audiences of the future, *Greek's* engagement with deep-rooted moral themes provide the play's resilience. In *Greek*, direct references to Thatcher and the particulars of political and social unrest within Britain of the late 1970's and early 1980's may suggest that its full power and meaning may eventually be compromised, however Berkoff's progressive treatment of the perennial themes of incest, guilt and responsibility provide the key to the play's durability. Ultimately, the socio-political proposals and recommendations embedded within both texts will provide relevance for alternate historical contexts and cultures, implanting the seeds of subversive thought.

I. plague, pestilence and pollution in 'berkoff's britain'

'...a nation half asleep and drugged with foul and bestial things poured out of packets' (*Greek*, 166).

Betty Caplan remarks, 'combining political satire with a treatise on sexual repression...(Britain's) "septic isle" is the target for Berkoff's spluttering rage - in particular, the passivity of a working class that has allowed the Thatcherite plague to happen' (1988). Importantly, much of Berkoff's work relies on the specific depiction of a very 'English' environment, and the 'so noble men of England' (*Greek*, 160) in order to establish connections to the English government and the policies of its Conservative Party. In *Greek*, Berkoff's collision with Sophocles is projected onto the stage by way of his British

heritage. Thus in *Greek*, the expression of social and cultural norms draws parallels with the classical text, producing reverberations in the modern context.

The vast suffering of humanity under misguided leadership is of central concern in his version of *Agamemnon*, where Berkoff enlists 'the heady Aeschylus' (*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, 9) in satiric attack against aspects of Britain's dominant cultural and social organisations. The cultivation of passivity and ignorance throughout the Trojan War, 'for years we wait/ for Agamemnon for a sign' (15) whereby the Chorus expresses its denial of the misery surrounding them, 'speak only of good/shut the horrors behind the door' (17) suggests the successful ideological sedation of Argive society. Back at home the Chorus describes its physical deterioration as it waits for the call to end the war, 'for years we wait/...senile carcasses spitting age and half-existence tottering on three legs' (15). Indeed, Berkoff's work is reflective of a radical social upheaval during the late 1960's and early 1970's, which Kershaw explains exposed 'the inadequacies of late-capitalism in providing for the needs of minorities and marginalised groups' (39). Thus Berkoff is positioned within the radical counter-cultural revolution of this period as artists the world over worked to supply the impetus for social change.

Regarding Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and its relation to his own *Greek*, Berkoff claims to have 'ransacked the entire legend' to create an environment 'full of riots, filth, decay, bombings, football mania, mobs at the palace gate, plague madness and post-pub depression' (*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, 139). Further, the playwright notes, 'In my eyes, Britain seemed to have become a gradually decaying island, preyed upon by the wandering hordes who saw no future for themselves in a society which had few ideals or messages to offer them' (*Greek*, 141). Thus, Berkoff's work would seem to hinge on a commitment to empowering audiences to attack the inadequacies of such a society.

The image of a 'gradually decaying' environment requiring civil action appears to be a perennial dramatic theme. While *Oedipus* in Sophocles' play rules a city in

the grip of a plague and seeks to dig out its evil core, Eddy's 'passion for life is inspired by the love he feels for his woman, and his detestation of the degrading environment he inherited...Eddy is a warrior who holds up the smoking sword as he goes in, attacking all that he finds polluted' (*Greek*, 141). Thus Eddy's zeal is initiated by his abhorrence of his environs, yet love is his enduring inspiration. In this sense it would appear that Eddy is a manifestation of the ideals of passion, love, purity and inspired action. In a similar vein, manifestations of pollution and plague reflect the 'violence that streamed through the streets, like an all pervading effluence ...the killing and maiming at public sports... the casual slaughtering of political opponents in Northern Ireland', as this bespoke to Berkoff 'a society in which an emotional plague had taken root' (*Greek*, 141).

Politically, the 1970's saw Britain in a state of flux. By 1979, the Labour Party was in ideological disarray, with social and economic instability resulting directly from their policies (Sked/Cook, 80). Indeed, Berkoff's vilification of the situation exposed the English populace as 'the world's greatest video watchers, since (they) had lost the ability to speak to each other' while Britain 'sat like zombies, strangled in (their) attempts to communicate' (*Greek*, 141). For a population tired of the repeated crises of the 1970's, Thatcher's promise of a return to strong governmental leadership undoubtedly had widespread public appeal. However, Berkoff's early critique of the Thatcherite reign is reasonably prophetic as the 'Iron Lady' did indeed rule with an 'Iron Fist', having taken control of an already weakened and apathetic populace. Indeed, historians concur with Berkoff as 'clearly, Thatcherism was bound to exacerbate confrontation, and produce a divided nation' (Sked/Cook, 81).

Consideration of the dominant ideology within British society is particularly disparaging in *Greek*. Sinfield notes, 'Most societies retain their current shape...because many people believe that things have to take more or less their present form - that improvement is not feasible, at least through the methods to hand' (81). The first scene entails Eddy ruminating on Dad's 'work-raped face' and his usual stream of 'that fascist bullshit', observing that 'you get a lot of

Nazi lovers in the British down and out' (147). Eddy's biological 'Dad' (given the title 'Manager' - demonstrating the importance of material and social status in the text) is aligned with the man initially presented as Eddy's 'Dad' through their mutual adoption of the dominant ideals of Britain's working classes. Eddy's biological mother, and future wife, when reflecting on her husband's death asks 'whose photos will I dust in the living room of his heroes, Hitler, Goebbels, Enoch, Paisley and Maggot not forgetting our dear royals (?)'(160). Berkoff illustrates lower class dissatisfaction through exaggerating the extreme beliefs upheld by a large percentage of the working class and their reactionary political stance. Therefore, in aligning Maggot Scratcher's government and the role of Britain's monarchy with Hitler's dictatorship, the reader is thus invited to question the plausibility of contemporary political discourses, the importance of inquiring into judicial procedures and the power of propagandist tools such as the media.

Sinfield notes that this 'is why one recognizes a dominant ideology: were there not such a powerful (plausible) discourse, people would not acquiesce in the injustice and humiliation that they experience' (81). Maggot Scratcher's government in *Greek* is shown to be a major constituent of the defeatist attitudes of the populace, witnessed when Dad tells Eddy 'we're used to wot we got' (176) and 'so what I got fuck all...from our fair state'. As he goes on to claim proudly 'now our useful working life has been sucked dry by the state...now that my boss god bless him sits back fat and greasy/ not that I mind, he got it by hard graft and cunning' (177), the reader is shown precisely the kind of defeatist attitude that allows plague to happen. Heightening this negative critique of capitalist leadership is the appearance of symptoms such policies induce within their workers. Polluting the 'cesspit' and 'scum-hole' of Eddy's Tufnell Park are his 'boozy old relatives...who stand all year doing as little as they can while they had one hand in the boss's till and the other scratching their balls' (145). Blind to the injustice and humiliation that they experience within hierarchical social structures, the popular working class attitude seems to be that 'this is just the way things are'.

In *Greek*, the use of satire, parody and travesty exposes a mismanagement of power within political leadership. Alongside Britain's royal family, Thatcher and her government are presented as pollutants, thus assuming responsibility for the British plague. The working classes, as represented in the microcosm of Eddy's family, (who also become the Chorus) rely on a naïve belief in leadership's commitment to keep them safe from disease and disorder. As Mum reiterates, 'Maggot is our only hope'(153). In *Agamemnon*, the Chorus is a symbol both of the physical presence of the people and their physical environs: in this case the nations of the United Kingdom. Scene 4 channels the voices of various subcultures within the U.K through Eddy, the new 'king of the western world' (157), climaxing in a scream for help,

OH GOD HELP ME. OH MAGGOT SCRATCHER HANG THE
CUNTS/ HANG THEM SLOW AND LET ME TAKE A
SKEWER AND JAB THEIR EYES OUT/ LOVELY/ GREEK
STYLE...

However, Maggot's bathetic response, 'Hanging's no answer to the plague madam/ you'd be hanging every day' (155) reinforces her disinterest in the well being of her people. Such disinterest exposes political leadership in neglect of the body politic - a situation unacceptable to radical artists such as Berkoff.

II. berkoff in the context of today

'It's over now/ the dead will never rise again/ no point in crying over life's unkindness' (*Agamemnon*, 21).

The perennial nature of the classical texts may seem obvious owing to the universality of their themes. In Berkoff's case, the 'updated' specifics of character, setting and action throw doubt on the question of their durability. A critic observes that

... when Mark-Anthony Turnage's *Greek* received its first performance at the 1988 Munich Biennale and later in Edinburgh and London, it was so identified as a protest against Thatcherism that there were doubts

about its durability. Last weekend's performances at London's South Bank Centre - only the second UK staging of the work - proved those doubts to be unfounded. The opera has weathered well - better than the Steven Berkoff play on which it was based' (An Old Story Played to a Modern Tune, 1998, p. 22).

Thus it would appear Berkoff's work has influenced contemporary theatre, if not contemporary sensibilities. Interestingly, *Greek* perhaps even more so than *Agamemnon*, helps to explain Berkoff's alleged contribution to the emergence of 'In Yer Face Theatre' in the 1990's owing to its filthy language, explicit sexual content, unmentionable subject matter and sudden bouts of violence (Sierz, 5).

Although Berkoff amplifies the themes of plague, pestilence and pollution in order to promote the scrutiny of those in positions of power, these themes also serve to vilify the apathy and ineffectiveness of the working classes. An investigation into the nature of both aristocratic and democratic leadership, its significance within his society and the importance of political health in general presents leadership as fallible and destructive. Berkoff's works suggest that one should expect lust and greed to cloud the moral and ethical responsibilities of leadership when granted unlimited access to power and the nation's material and intellectual wealth. Ultimately, the deterioration of a fractured, apathetic and polluted society invites the equalising (yet devastating) forces of plague and pestilence.

Leadership's neglect of its moral and ethical responsibilities directly affects the nation's health. This becomes evident as Brian Vickers suggests that in the Greek plays the Chorus 'represents the section of society most relevant to the action' (10). In Berkoff's *Agamemnon*, the apathy of those excluded from military action appears to be of greater concern than the acquiescence of the soldiers in the Trojan War. Indeed, the plight of the soldiers is presented as stemming from their inevitable patriotic duty, as illustrated in Battle One, 'I am fighting for Troy I am fighting for Greece You are killing me brother You are killing me' (14). It is not until much too late that the people at home begin to contemplate revolt and

the futility of death en masse caused by political altercation is finally questioned:

The people mutter against these leaders/ for each
widowed bed/ fatherless child/ an angry hate
prevails/ to send our youth to battle/ for political
strife (19).

Thus the fallibility of political leadership is shown to cause the ruin of an entire generation, in turn providing the grounds for its own downfall.

Readers and audiences now can draw a number of historical parallels with such well-publicised conflicts in recent years as the War on Iraq, or the Falklands War under Thatcher's (mis) management. Berkoff has stated that his play about this latter conflict, *Sink the Belgrano*, 'was the first and only play I've written to be based on actual contemporary events' (*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, 159). However, I would argue that *Agamemnon* is a pacifist's protest in the same vein as the 'No War for Oil' idiom so familiar to us in 2003, whilst *Greek* challenges received notions of sexuality and moral behaviour in order to transgress the damaging forces of repression.

Michel Foucault's analytics of power suggest that the historical distinction between modes of power may fall under the categories of sovereign, juridical-discursive and modern power (24). Those elements of power that inform different kinds of social discipline are of significant concern in *Agamemnon* and *Greek* where the despotic imperatives of social, cultural and economic oppression are transferred to modern day Britain. Foucault writes, 'in order to see perfect disciplines functioning, rulers dreamt of the state of plague', after the premise that disciplinary power works on bodies and that the individual body is an essentially socially malleable substance. Hence the 'political dream ...of a disciplined society' (51) is implicitly linked to the corporeal and material management of the plague. In this way, plague and pestilence in Berkoff's work has a historical resonance befitting the attack of contemporary political motives.

III. future berkoff

'While I each day and year have scored another niche into this world of ours...' (*Greek*, 165-6).

Integral to many of Berkoff's plays, 'in which the stark imperatives of Greek tragedy are transferred to the bleak moral universe of Berkoff's East End' (McAfee, 1996) is the use of allegory. In this sense his work recalls Albert Camus' *La Peste* or '*The Plague*', in which the 'common process of collective suffering' (Williams, 182) reminds us that a city during plague times very much resembles a city under siege. Camus' political allegory, written during World War II, depicts pestilence as confusing the ordinary social consciousness, where facing the problems of the plague simply 'boils' down to facing the problem of humankind's mortality. Whilst Christine Boeckl believes that Camus asks the age-old question posed in much plague art: 'If God is love, why does evil exist?' (142), similarly Berkoff seems to offer humanity the awful burden of freedom to determine the fate of humankind, without recourse to an omniscient, all-forgiving deity.

Raymond Williams suggests that in Camus 'inevitably, the plague at its full extent disrupts the ordinary social consciousness', yet while 'the suffering and the sense of exile are common, the essential revolt is not' (182). Similarly, in *Greek*, Eddy and his Mother/Wife are alone in their efforts to quell the spread of the plague, both living through and revolting against the apathy and oppression of the 'common man'. Further, he notes that 'individuals suffer for what they are and naturally desire, rather than for what they try to do, and the innocent are swept up with the guilty, with epidemic force' (104). As material interests (particularly those relating to class) are moved from the periphery to the core in Berkoff's modern rendering of Aeschylus and Sophocles, the playwright questions the inability of an oppressed and consequently impotent population to challenge their leader's authority. It seems problems will often occur when the working classes refuse to question leadership, in this respect recalling both Sophocles and Aeschylus.

Themes of violence and destruction (and the anachronistic appearance of nuclear weapons) heighten the impact of a polluted power structure. In 'The Celebration', the chorus asks,

Have you not seen the end of evil/ the end of pride/ ...
it's just the same/ just as stupid and futile/ ...
no more queens/ kings/ generals/ princes/ ministers/
dictators/ no more slaying for them/ ...
no more ...caused by them ...no more horrors (23).

Responsibility for 'modern and future wars' is thus laid directly onto the numerous forms of governmental leadership; royal, military and political. Confronting the perennial theme of war assists Berkoff in producing reverberations in the present social climate of nuclear terror, thus driving home the guilt afforded to world leaders perpetuating this sadistic tradition. Additionally, the Chorus is used to stress the disproportion of the losses suffered by Trojan and Argive societies and the doubtful value of their cause. Helen, at most a cultural icon or a symbol of Argive pride, is still one woman as compared to the thousands killed in her defence; 'some young whore who must be old and poxy now/ they'll say it wasn't worth it after all' (13). Thus, the playwright's didactic approach would seem to recommend a call for responsible moral judgements and the importance of learning from history's mistakes.

Agamemnon and his sense of responsibility as fearless leader are necessarily juxtaposed with his role as father. The parallels drawn between Helen and Iphigenia are thus enormously disturbing when the latter is reduced to the status of sacrificial animal. A polluted sense of moral and ethical responsibility here invites the wrath of Clytemnestra as she 'vows to avenge the bloody deed/ and on it goes/ without an end/ the curse first laid on the house of Atreus' (13). Conversely, lust for Helen in Berkoff's play may be read as symbolic of the lust for material power within capitalist leadership. In both versions of *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra's slaying of her husband is juxtaposed somewhat ironically with her resolve to set the House of Atreus in order once again. The play closes with Clytemnestra restraining Aegisthus and promising 'you and I are in power darling

/ we shall order things well' (33). Where Clytemnestra's concept of 'order' is presented as misguided and resulting largely from her personal goal of vengeance, this emphasis on order within the mayhem of bloody conflict works to raise awareness of the irrationality that must by necessity accompany times of war.

Responsibility is a somewhat problematic theme within Berkoff's texts, relative to the point of view of individual characters. One assumes that the Sphinx in *Agamemnon* is the beast that Berkoff speaks about in the introduction, the 'beast of frustration and anger, whose hunger is appeased by these revolting scraps, which momentarily dull its needs' (141). As she tells Eddy, 'men need killing off before they kill off the world' (168), a sentiment consistent with the text, yet in this play the majority of the populace regard the Sphinx herself as helping to 'spread the canker and the rot' (167). Berkoff's introduction refers to Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and how 'Oedipus found a city in the grip of a plague and sought to rid the city of its evil center represented by the Sphinx' (141). This interpretation suggests that the Sphinx in Sophocles' text merely takes on evil characteristics; she is a manifestation of the perversions of an entire society rather than perversion itself.

IV. toward a berkovian world order

'...my dearest wish is that peace exists' (*Agamemnon*, 19).

The balance between order and disorder feeds the possibility of mass destruction in any society. It may be argued that the disordering forces of war and epidemic disease will eventually produce order of a different kind. Throughout history, the morbid truth remains that death en masse has often cleared the way for economic and social progress. Within Europe of the fourteenth century, the Black Death killed millions of people, effectively wiping out the majority of the country's means of production. Prior to the plague, almost 90% of the population were peasants, unpaid farmers barely existing on large estates owned by nobles or high officials of the Church. Following the scourge, the surviving workers were

in enormous demand, able to demand wages, better living conditions and thus enjoying greater freedom and power (McGowen, 43-7). The enormous divide between 'the rich' and 'the poor' was thus reduced, throwing doubt on the highly unequal and hierarchical nature of medieval society and undermining the hegemony of the ruling elite.

Traditionally, plague is associated with the working or lower classes, to the point where in many countries the bubonic plague was called the 'poor plague' or 'beggar's disease' (McGowen, 40). Owing to factors influencing the outbreak of epidemics including overpopulation, war, lack of education, lack of sanitation and natural disaster, it appears that those who are poor in wealth are also often poor in health. The wealthy also have the option of travelling to uncontaminated areas. However, once an endemic starts, there are no social boundaries as to whom the disease kills: plague is certainly public enemy #1.

Interestingly, Rosen believes 'Berkoff's issue with the class-system lends itself to a socialist philosophy of ensemble - everyone will contribute equally to the whole' (IV, 3). It is possible to see Berkoff's chorus as a microcosm of an idealised community, as witnessed by Berkoff as he notes:

...ensemble work is a tricky concept for the Brits, since it really comes from countries where people like and love each other and are free and liberal with each other. You have to be fond of experimenting since it means you desire to merge with your group. An ensemble is really a big family that does not feel uncomfortable, but in the class-ridden British society many directors feel a little awkward with the idea of ensemble work: they don't wish to get involved ...
(*Coriolanus in Deutschland*, 52-3).

It seems that in the macrocosm of society, indifference or an unwillingness to 'get involved' is for Berkoff a negative and contagious force, contributing to a dearth in artistic and societal development. Hence Berkoff's artistic appeal to alternative and experimental theatre movements such as the afore-mentioned 'In-Yer-Face-Theatre' characterised by the works of Sarah Kane and Mark

Ravenhill and even the works of Conor Macpherson, Harry Gibson and Irvine Welsh.

Ironically, Berkoff's artistic career harbours a fundamental contradiction. Whilst he purports to be the voice of working class ideology his connections remain with audiences of 'high art'. Thus Berkoff's medium of choice has perhaps stunted the potential of his work for positive social change owing to the financial exclusiveness of professional theatre, wherein he denies those most enthusiastic and politically active of social groups; teenagers and young adults. For audiences of Aeschylus and Sophocles, much as for audiences of Shakespeare, theatre was a major social event across a range of social classes. Perhaps the politically and socially conscious theatre artists of today would do well to learn from the efforts of these and other predecessors in their attempts to create lasting theatrical impressions. Additionally, Berkoff's failure to appropriate that very medium which he sees as successfully capturing (to the point of 'zombiedom') the British working class public seems a glaring mistake. In order to reach into the hearts and minds of the masses, television (and feature film) might have been the obvious choice.

Nevertheless, one can only hope that an examination of the iconoclastic Steven Berkoff as an auteur director and adapter will help to further awareness of his progressive contributions to humanity and art. Where visual spectacle, political satire and social comment would seem to be key elements of Berkoff's performance mode, here verbal and visual interpretation of the written text enables the notions of pestilence, plague and pollution to be intensified within a particular performance. Ultimately, manifestations of plague, pestilence and pollution are vehicles for Berkoff's expressions of distaste and hope, paving the way for progressive socio-political proposals and recommendations. Just as 'Eddy seeks to reaffirm his beliefs and inculcate a new order of things with his vision and life-affirming energy' (*Greek*, 141), Berkoff works to liberate humanity from the crippling assumptions and patterns of thought that hold it captive, through his ambitious proposal of a new world order. As Berkoff collides with the work of

Aeschylus and Sophocles in an attempt to reawaken the dulled passions of a disenchanted society, so can we expect playwrights of future generations to confront (and revise as their era demands) the work of their forbears.

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