

**AUSTRALIAN VIEWS OF A FRENCH CLASSIC:  
AUDIENCES FOR *PHEDRA*  
DIRECTED BY MICHAEL GOW**

**Prologue**

Several points must be made by way of a prologue to this discussion. It was not possible, in the case of *Phedra*, to give questionnaires to spectators before the show and briefly explain the purposes of my research to them. I had adopted this direct approach in my studies of audiences for the Sydney Theatre Company's *Three Sisters* directed by Richard Wherrett and for *The Tempest* directed by Neil Armfield at the Belvoir Street Theatre. I had previously used a similar method in my research on audiences for Italo-Australian community theatre. Questionnaires for *Phedra* were placed on the seats of the Wharf Studio, which holds 140 people. The lack of contact with potential respondents had a negative effect on returns. Thus compare a 67% return on questionnaires distributed for *Three Sisters* and 62% for *The Tempest* with 19% for *Phedra*.

The low return for *Phedra* may mean that the sample is not altogether representative of the production's audiences as a whole (a total of 4,125 viewers). Nevertheless, I suspect that the demographic profile available would not have been radically altered by an increased number of completed questionnaires. The results suggest that we would have been dealing with a select audience, whatever the size of the sample. The people who took the trouble to reply - a good half of them by mail - are connoisseurs and perhaps even a coterie especially tuned in to "art-theatre". *Phedra* was the first of three productions directed by Michael Gow for "New Stages", an experimental project of the STC. The play had never been staged before in Australia. Gow, who describes the play as "great" and sees it as one of several models for writing in this country, did

not underestimate the novelty of the event.

While the size of the sample may not be a troublesome issue from a demographic point of view, it is quite possible that a higher return would have given a more finely contoured picture of spectators' assessment of the production. The data to hand shows spectators who are extremely enthusiastic or extremely critical, the first group well and truly outweighing the second. Another hypothesis cannot be excluded, namely, that a higher return may have expanded the group of critical viewers, although without necessarily changing the polarization evident in the sample. What is clear from the replies is that our spectators, by their literacy, cultural know-how and interpretative skill in respect of stage processes, constitute a sub-group or fraction of the hypothetically select audience to which I referred above. Hence my term "connoisseurs" for these spectators. It must be noted that the most detailed and often most articulate responses came in by mail. Unfavourable commentaries were written especially carefully. Time to think through their ideas and feelings about the production was obviously a contributing factor to the quality of these replies, some of which had a decidedly studious ring. However, those who completed questionnaires straight after performances, although generally using fewer words, were no less competent for want of time for meditation.

The questionnaire, apart from aiming to map out the social composition of audiences along with other quantitative data, focused on specific aspects of the production. This series of questions began with a request for an overall assessment, my assumption being that an overview would include features that had had a particular resonance for respondents (which was indeed the case). It continued with questions on the set and lights. In order to elicit interpretative rather than merely descriptive answers, these were put in the form of "Do you think the set [later "lights"] contributed to the meaning of this version? Please explain". The following question centred on the actors' performances. It was unguided insofar as it did not single out any particular play element for discussion. Spectators were left to pick out whatever had caught their attention. I chose the set and lights for commentary, rather than, say, costumes or sound, because Gow and I had agreed they were salient features of the production - not to the exclusion of the others, but probably more tightly bound to Gow's conception of the work. I assumed, Gow here also agreeing, that other stage processes would be mentioned according to respondents' aesthetic disposition - which proved to be correct. The whole point of my asking precise and what may well have appeared to be pedantic questions about the production's aesthetic was to discover just how alert or sensitive spectators were in

respect of the work's stylistic qualities, this perhaps also indicating the degree to which they were responsive to, and/or knowledgeable about, theatre aesthetics in general.

The series of interpretative questions was prefaced by a "Yes/No" question asking whether respondents had read the play. There was a two-fold purpose behind this question: find out whether spectators were familiar with the playtext, their familiarity or lack of it possibly affecting their interaction with the production; relate this data to information coming from answers that sketched out their theatre culture. Two questions regarding their theatre culture asked, firstly, whether they related *Phedra* to other plays they knew and, secondly, whether they related it to other plays besides those by Shakespeare that have been called classics. There is a certain degree of overlap between these two questions, but the point of asking the second was to link it with another in which "classic" is a key word. The third question, then, in this bracket, asked whether they thought *Phedra*, a French classic, was relevant to audiences in Australia today. Here, although searching for additional clues to their theatre culture, I was seeking respondents' ideas about what constituted a classic as well as how they perceived the production in cultural terms. Would they, for example, refer to the French context of *Phedra* and compare and contrast it with Gow's particular vision? Or would they by-pass references to French culture, drawing, instead, on some other cultural framework that, in their eyes, helped explain the tone and temper of the production? I was looking, in other words, for what might be called cultural interaction or cross-cultural apperception.

This discussion will concentrate on respondents' observations on staging, connecting them where possible with the broader cultural issues that I have briefly outlined. My intention is to construct a dialogue between spectators, Michael Gow, and Rose Clemente, who played the role of *Phedra*, so that we may look more closely at the interrelationship - imputed, perceived and real - between spectators, performers and director. After all, performance is the process constituted by them collectively. I am using material from interviews I conducted with Gow and Clemente independently of each other after the run of performances had ended. The dialogue or dialogic encounter, then, is a reconstruction from multiple voices discussing the production from their respective positions, my own voice included.

## Social Composition

The social composition of our spectators - 161 in all - may be summarized as follows. One hundred of them are women. Grouping by age shows 23% between 31 and 40, and 21% each between the ages of 21 and 30, and 41 and 50; 16% are over 61. I am giving a detailed breakdown because the composition by age does not altogether correspond with Gow and Clemente's imagined audience. Both of them thought *Phedra* would attract "younger people", this principally meaning people around twenty-five, if I am interpreting their words correctly. Clemente, whatever her precise definition of youth may be, added that she envisaged spectators "who wanted to be excited, people who wanted to be amazed" and who "were interested in the possibilities of where theatre could go". She contrasted her imaginary spectators with "the usual people who go to the STC". Clemente's remarks are to be understood in terms of her view of *Phedra* which, she believes, transcends the emotional boundaries that usually constrain Australian productions. In Clemente's words: "I think that it is really useful for an Australian audience to be confronted on the emotional level because it confronts something very basic to the Australian psyche, which does not want to deal with emotions at all, which is a complete denial of the emotional side of life, and of spiritual life as well". She goes on to explain that "art creates the soul and the conscience of the nation", which, in her view, is not properly recognized in Australia. Hence the "emotional side of life" continues to be denied, in the world as well as in the theatre.

Gow, for his part, explains that he wanted to start "full on" and not "let up" at any point. However, this intensity was not unique to *Phedra*: it was the goal of all his productions for "New Stages". Gow does not explicitly compare his intentions with those of any other type of theatre, as Clemente does. Nevertheless, he seems to be drawing on an implicit comparison insofar as, to his mind, emotional intensity appears to be part of what is "new" about the project as a whole.

Most of the spectators responded favourably to the high pitch set by Gow and the performers, one describing it as "over the top", which, she believes, "suited the old ale"; another, as if echoing Gow's words, says the production was "full on"; yet another speaks of its "overblown emotionalism", explaining that she especially liked this in Clemente's performance. A particularly blownout spectator exclaims: "Fuck!!! I had to scrape my jaw off the floor!" Another said she was "too moved to

complete the survey". We shall return to our spectators' emotions shortly.

Grouping by formal education shows that 74% are university educated. Classification by occupation, here using the categories of the Australian Bureau of Statistics, gives us 54% who are professional people and 4% listed under "managers and administrators". A clear majority, then, belongs to the top two categories, 16% of whom work in the arts. The next largest groupings are students and retired people, neither of whom figure in the ABS categories, but were required for the sample taken. Even so, at 14% and 11% respectively, they fall way behind the occupational elite. In short, our audience of connoisseurs has the educational qualifications and professional status fit for connoisseurs, even if it may not necessarily have the financial and other privileges to which connoisseurs might like to be accustomed.

Finally, my group includes ethnic identity, which is usually missing - and wrongly so - from surveys of any kind, the paltry few on theatre audiences across the world being no exception. The fact that the Australian census is an exception to the general rule only confirms the rule. The great majority (80%) comes from English-speaking backgrounds: 68% of the total number of respondents define themselves as Anglo/Celtic-Australian; 12% are American, English, Irish (born in Australia or the U.K.) and New Zealanders. The remaining 20% accounts for Australians of non-Anglo/Celtic origin as well as those who do not claim to be Australian in any shape or form (6%, who describe themselves, for instance, as "French", "Mediterranean" or "European").

Is it possible to conclude from such a small sample that "wogs" do not perceive "New Stages" to be for them, not least when (and perhaps least of all when) a grand foreign tragedy is on the boards? What must be addressed first and foremost through this question is the different class status of "wogs" in Australia. The non-Anglo/Celts viewing *Phedra* at the STC belong to various fractions of the middle class. This indicates that relatively privileged non-Anglo/Celts go to "established" or "mainstream" theatre even though they are a minority in respect of the total audience, which is dominated by Anglo/Celts. And this suggests that, although ethnic identity is crucial (for a start it delineates the cultural parameters of individuals and groups), it cannot be given mythical proportions. In other words, ethnicity per se cannot be given priority when inclusion in, or exclusion from, the "high" arts is under discussion: ethnicity can neither be separated from social class nor elevated above class.

And this brings me back to my question. I believe that the sample is too small to allow us to draw any definitive conclusions in reply. However,

when my data for *Phedra* is placed in the context of my research on audiences to date, exactly the same pattern recurs, albeit on a bigger scale: that is to say, middle-class non-Anglo/Celts are always a small minority; their lower-middle-class or working-class counterparts are always virtually invisible; the latter only become visible at community theatre performances. What the overall pattern emerging from my research suggests is that “establishment” or “mainstream” theatre primarily plays to the Anglo/Celtic middle class, however class fractions within it are described. Secondly, it suggests that non-Anglo/Celtic community theatre, by virtue of the kind of spectators to which it performs and which, to a certain extent, it creates, fulfils an important role for so-called “ethnic” communities, the so-called “community at large” and for the theatre as such, precisely because it creates new spectators for the art. This conclusion, even if incomplete, cannot be ignored when the social role of theatre is at issue, as it must be when spectators are at issue.

Let us now look at the subject of “wogs” from the theatre-preparing side of the stage. Gow commented on my questions about casting with some humour: “I wanted to emphasize their foreignness [that is, of *Phedra* and *Oenon*] by casting Rose, an Italian, as *Phedra*, and Arianthe Galani, a Greek, as *Oenon*, whereas all the others were terribly Aryan; so that it was very much an Anglo-centric court with two wogs in it, causing all this trouble, as wogs do”. To my prompt on whether he was making a specific political point through his casting, Gow replied: “That’s what part of the problem in the play is. Everyone keeps talking about the “foreign woman’s son” or “Hippolytus has got a bit of wog blood in him” . . . and everyone keeps saying “the daughter of Minos and Pasiphae”. It’s like calling her a Balt or a reffo.” Rose Clemente, when interviewed, spoke positively about her Italian culture, claiming it gave her the emotional and imaginative resources required for acting per se, let alone for the role of *Phedra*. *Phedra*, she believes, is “a monster of passion and emotion” that cannot be held back by the rules of decorum of the kind that reign in inhibited social groups, whether one wishes to describe them in specific cultural terms or not. Her Italian background gave her an understanding of how to “let go”, this being essential because, in Clemente’s view, “the audience and the performer in *Phedra* should be completely shattered by the end of the performance” and also be as “elevated at the end” as the character is herself.

## Text and Production

Now to the spectators' observations. Forty-eight of them had read the play, 14 among them giving a highly critical account of the production. Some of these spectators found the translation "disappointing", "poor" or "bad". Several of those who had not read the play thought the translation became "too colloquial", giving as an example Theseus' "What's going on here?" Most of those who liked the translation ("fantastic", "excellent", "superb") had not read the play, some commenting on its accessible language and general clarity. Accessibility seemed to be a pervasive theme of commentaries, whether they referred to the text/script or to the production in its entirety. Several of those who were familiar with the text noted that what they liked most about the production was that "someone had taken the trouble to produce it". One retired woman over sixty takes up this line of thought saying she liked "the attempt to come to grips with the problems of staging a French classic of a Greek myth in a modern theatre".

We should note that, when *not* prompted to talk about a "French classic" (this question coming later), very few people refer to the play as French. Those who situate it culturally describe it primarily as a "Greek tragedy". This association is very pronounced in subsequent answers to the question asking spectators to what other plays they relate *Phedra*. "Greek tragedy", whether cited generically or named by title or author, comes way out on top, *Oedipus* well and truly the first on the list, *Medea* still prominent though some way behind. A mere six references to French theatre (three of them to Racine) pale into insignificance. However, those who give a negative assessment of the production argue that it pays little or no attention to Racine's *Phèdre* or to anything to do with seventeenth-century French drama. Gow's reflections in my interview with him suggest that Ancient Greece rather than France is his touchstone. Clemente unambiguously refers to the Greeks as the guiding force behind her performance. All of which suggests that, on this issue, the dialogue between the director, actor and spectators is not at cross-purposes, dissenting voices simply underscoring what was intentionally realized on stage.

The spectators who engaged positively with the production responded overwhelmingly to its "power", "passions", "emotions" and "intensity", these key words allowing linkages with such adjectives as "compelling", "riveting", "involving" and "breathtaking". A number stress the

“simplicity”, “sparseness” or “concentration” of the whole. Admiration is expressed for the performances in general or for Clemente in particular. For the sake of order in my exposition, I shall include this in my summary of answers to the question referring specifically to performances. A small group (considerably smaller than the one focusing on performance) praises Gow’s direction, some noting his wise decision to carry through without an interval, which “would have lost the tension”. What is also noted specifically (as distinct from generalities like “well-directed”) is the “relentless quality [or “relentless pace”] of the direction” which, according to one student, “worked well to oppress the audience into a feeling of helplessness similar to that of the protagonists”. About the same number of people like the intimacy of the venue and/or the close contact between audience and stage, this contact, in their view, intensifying the drama played out. A significant number of those reacting enthusiastically to the production/performances/direction also refer to the set which is invariably described as “simple”, “sparse”, “bare” or “minimal” - all terms concatenations of each other. The set, then, is very much part of the impact made by the production on spectators.

## **Set, Colour and Sound**

The question concerning the set elicited clear responses (including three indignant “What set!”). They may be grouped as follows. The first and largest group concerns explanations as to how the set “did not distract from” or “allowed me [or “the audience”] to concentrate on the “language”, “text”, “dialogue” or “words”, the “action”, the “actors” or “performances”, the “emotions” or “passions” and the “characters”. As one woman puts it: “It’s about passions, not furniture”. I have listed all quoted words in descending order, that is, by how frequently they are repeated.

The second, smaller group concerns answers that attribute meaning to the set. Put differently, we could say that they attempt to link set, content, context and execution organically. Thus, for example, the set was “stark like the theme”; it “reflected the characters’ trappedness and isolation”; it “gave the impression of a closed and oppressive situation”; it was “one contained but undefined space”; or, in the words of another spectator, it “supported the unity of the piece”. The person I have just quoted notes “Time, Place and Action” in parentheses by way of commentary on her



notion of unity. Her allusion to classical conventions joins up with allusions scattered here and there to the production's classical "elements" or "mood". Others felt the "abstract" set had a "timeless quality" or conveyed a sense of "universality".

Located in the same group of interpretative answers are those focusing on the double doors upstage and three door-like openings at stage-right. The double doors were ensconced in the blue carpet that covered the floor and swept up the walls in one bloc of colour. The openings at the side were diagonal to the audience. They were orange-red, blue and green and were illuminated by strong shafts of light coming from off-stage. These stark colours and light threw into relief the bodies of the performers entering, standing or moving out of view through them.

Very few discuss these openings and doors, but all agree they suggest a "world outside" or some sort of external force impinging on the characters, whether "the gods" or "fate". One spectator elaborates: "I thought the fourth door representing the tragedy of fate/destiny was quite an effective contrast to the three doors of "freedom" of everyday life". Another writes: "the corridor-like entrances created a sense of confinement, a space at once connected to and cut off from the outside world". Those who single out the double doors, described by one as "opening magically", agree it symbolizes Hell, Hades or Death. One states that "it obviously led to Hades as it was through that door that Theseus returned". This is exactly what Gow had intended to communicate.

However, a relatively large number of spectators were puzzled by the side-openings and doors, asking whether they were meant to symbolize anything in particular or stating flatly that they did not understand their significance or symbolism. One or two explain they have little knowledge of "production techniques". Another one or two say they had tried to follow the actors' entrances and exits to see if these movements traced out a meaningful pattern. Several wonder about the colours of the side entrances, usually expressing their uncertainty by a question mark. A few venture an interpretation. One spectator answers decisively that red is for passion, green for youth, and blue for the state - this being the only reference ever to the high politics of Racine's play. The reference is, to my mind, all the more astute because the politics of state, even if narrowed down to a matter of struggle for political power, is fundamental both to Racine's tragedy and Greek tragedy - which feature, however, is not explored by the production.

As for the blue carpet enclosing the space, only three people attempt to decode it, one saying it has a "timeless sea-bound effect", another referring to Neptune (and presumably here connecting blue to narrative

and thematic structure as well as to the denouement in Hippolytus' death). The third says the blue set reminds him of an airport lounge. If colour inspires attention, the sound effects marking a turn of events draw little attention. One or two associate them with the sea. One remarks that "the deafening noise at the end signifies the wrath of the Gods and Phedra's final destruction". Another is reminded of a 747 taking off or landing.

## Actors' Performances

The actors' performances sparked off what might be called - when reconstructed after the event - a heated debate between an enthusiastic majority and a critical minority. A relatively small cluster of lukewarm reactions takes the middle ground.

The majority uses words similar to those appearing in accounts of the production ("passions", "emotions", and so on). There is also a new vocabulary. Thus, spectators speak of the faultless, unaffected, bold, brave, consistent, authentic, convincing, straightforward or unashamedly honest work of the actors. Respondents occasionally elaborate, as does, for example, a drama teacher who, having referred to honesty, adds that she finds it "quite refreshing" because "there is so much half-hearted rubbish around". We could say that, in cases like this one, aesthetic evaluations also articulate the cultural values of the speaker. This is probably just as true of commentaries homing in on the terms "passion" and "emotion", that is, these are the very qualities considered worthy of dissemination in and through the theatre. Our spectators seem to be suggesting, particularly through their own insistence on these qualities, that the theatre does not make enough use of them.

Accolades for Clemente virtually double when respondents are asked to concentrate on the actors' performances. And, although there is a good deal of material on her, it is probably best summarized by the following assessments: "Clemente plays through her body"; she "is a portrait of obsession"; the "no frills, uninhibited, unglamorized quality of Clemente's performance was superb". Arianthe Galani is praised consistently. Those who develop their thoughts point out, for instance, her "dignified beauty", "restrained characterization" and "modulated voice". Josephine Byrnes as Aricia is noted for her grace and Don Reid as Theramenes for his maturity. Brian Vriends as Hippolytus and John Walton as Theseus are

rarely cited positively. They receive far more attention on the contra side of the debate.

However, from whichever side of the debate we look, we find spectators frankly bemused by Hippolytus' nakedness in the opening scene and by the fact that his torso remains bare some way into the performance. The only person who offers an explanation may be taken as providing a reply to the queries raised. She talks about Hippolytus' "stages of loss of innocence" right up until he is "clothed in a full-length coat". Our spectator hits the mark in that Gow, when discussing Hippolytus, also stresses the latter's innocence; and apart from making statements about Hippolytus, Vriends' states of undress and semi-dress were to be taken as a metaphor for the processes of hiding and disclosure enacted throughout (my paraphrase of Gow's words). Clemente is particularly interesting on Hippolytus, whom she sees as representing the virility, independence and above all freedom that Phedra desires for herself. These motifs run through Clemente's account of Phedra. Her image of Phedra as a wild stallion who, when locked in, *will* kick the walls down, eloquently synthesizes her conception of her role and how she had hoped to execute it.

Spectators in the minority - 17% of the total number of respondents - may not have missed the point, but interpret Phedra's lashing out as hysteria. Several of them feel the role required "greater depth and subtlety" and notably at the end when, in the words of an irritated respondent, "Phedra has just told us that she is dying and Panop confirms it, yet she stands up there like a prize-fighter and doesn't even totter". The same person says of the whole production that she "was longing for a change in tempo, pauses, a silence or two, in those long streams of words". Her sentiments are echoed by others who found no change in pace, tone or pitch, no shades of emotion (or "too much shouting" and variations thereof), the lines "spoken too fast", the "diction muffled" and a "lack of ensemble acting". A few found the production verged on comedy or caricature, one of them pointing out that the audience laughed at inappropriate moments. A retired doctor who liked Galani and Reid's performances exclaims: "Where was the nobility? The main characters were royal, for heaven's sake. Where was the mighty Theseus, slayer of monsters, lover and leaver of women, communicator with gods? We had a weak and vacillating man". This woman also modestly states that, although she noticed the lighting and its changes, she was "not at all knowledgeable about its use".

It is worth noting, albeit briefly, that commentaries on the light design refer to the play of light and shade, generally relating it to the characters'

predicament or to the sequence of events. Many of them speak of the bright light on Phedra at the end which, in the words of one representative spectator, "had the effect of clearly exposing Phedra's torment to full view". My questionnaire did not ask about costumes. It was therefore all the more gratifying to find remarks on them, most of them favourable. A number of respondents expressed uncertainty as to why the costumes were inconsistent or so mixed - ball gowns versus Hippolytus' "Alain Delon musketeer shirt", as one spectator put it.

What can be concluded from all this about our select audience, apart from the points regarding the actor-director-spectator nexus emerging from my discussion? There does not appear to be a pronounced tendency, by whichever invariable we break down the data, that is, by age, gender, education, occupation or ethnic grouping. In other words, favourable interaction is spread across the board in proportion to the number of spectators grouped under each invariable. The same holds for those interacting unfavourably, except for one factor: academics who give a negative assessment slightly outnumber those who give a positive account. Still going with critical views by occupation: of the 26 arts workers noted earlier in percentage terms (16%), only two are critical - a male German-Australian sculptor and a female Anglo/Celtic producer. When we distinguish by ethnic grouping in order to see whether differentiation by culture is possible, we find that very few non-Anglo/Celts, even in proportion to their small number, evaluate the production critically.

Thus, in the absence of pronounced differentiation, we may have to conclude that our audience, which is privileged by virtue of its education and occupation, also constitutes a select audience by virtue of its ability to observe and record what occurs on stage, whether favourably or not. In addition, one-third of our audience is composed of STC spectators, some of whom last attended an STC production a year before seeing *Phedra*. Spectators who had been to the Belvoir Street Theatre before coming to *Phedra* follow a good way behind. Other theatres named cannot begin to compete with the number of times respondents refer to the STC as the theatre where they last saw a play production. Does this mean, contrary to Clemente's hopes and perhaps also to Gow and the STC's aspirations, that "New Stages" fundamentally plays to "old hands"?