

Article

The Open Constructed Public Sphere: Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* in a Version by David Greig

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Received: 31 August 2019; Accepted: 1 February 2020; Published: 18 February 2020



Abstract: This article looks at the 'public' 'place' of drama in Britain at present by offering an analysis of a contemporary version of an ancient Greek play by Aeschylus, entitled *The Suppliant Women*, written by David Greig, directed by Ramin Gray, and first performed at the Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh in 2016. Following an agonistic (Chantal Mouffe), rather than a consensual (Jürgen Habermas) model of the public sphere, it argues that under globalisation, three cumulative and interwoven senses of the public sphere, the discursive, the spatial, and the individual and his/her/their relation to a larger form of organisation, despite persisting hegemonic structures that perpetuate their containment, have become undone. This is the kind of unbounded model of public sphere Greig's version of Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* seems to suggest by precisely offering undoings of discourses, spaces, and individualisations. In order to frame the first kind of undoing, that is, the unmarking of theatre as contained, the article uses Christopher Balme's notion of 'open theatrical public sphere', and in order to frame the second, that is, the undoing of elements 'in' Greig's version, the article utilises Greig's concept of 'constructed space'. The article arrives then at the notion of the open constructed public sphere in relation to *The Suppliant Women*. By engaging with this porous model of the public sphere, *The Suppliant Women* enacts a protest against exclusionary, reductive models of exchange and organisation, political engagement, and belonging under globalisation.

Keywords: *The Suppliant Women*; Aeschylus; David Greig; public sphere; political theatre

What the public sphere is and/or becomes depends at least on three interconnecting aspects. First, it is dependent on the language and other forms of communication that 'we' use as well as the character of those forms of exchange. Second, it depends on the propagation of discourse and the spaces where it is distributed and the control over those. Third, it is also contingent upon the opinion, thinking patterns, and relationship between the individual and larger forms of organisation generated and the actions and the impact of the actions that occur as a result. In this article, theatre is understood as part of the public sphere. But more particularly, theatre is understood as an arena that can intervene those three interconnected aspects of the public sphere. After all, theatre exhibits some form/s of communication in some form of space/s where relationality is invoked and/or involved. But why intervene, why participate more explicitly in a conversation on what the public sphere 'should' be or become? Because the public sphere is worryingly dysfunctional at present. Discursive arenas are dominated by a circuit of negative affects that encourage toxic versions of individualism. The spaces where ideas are distributed are manipulated, controlled, and taken over by capital. 'Individuals', perhaps enmeshed in a sense of illusion of social media polyphony, may find it very difficult to think beyond the uniform discourses available and the rounded pattern of individualism on offer, which prevents him/her/them from imagining more creative relations to herself/himself/themselves and to larger forms of organisation. This article argues that in plays such as Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* in a version by David Greig (Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh, 2016), three cumulative and interwoven senses of the public sphere, the discursive, the spatial, and the individual and his/her/their relation

to a larger form of organisation, are offered as undone, perhaps illuminating a way forward for the understanding and practice of the public sphere.

Mainly since the 2010s, Greig's theatre has been increasingly interested in the idea of the 'public sphere'. While always questioning the social and political function of his plays, Greig's works' relation between the dramatic representational narrative and the public sphere was initially and predominantly powerfully referential. Since around the 2010s, I would argue that this search has turned into a more explicit exploration of the public sphere, which manifests as an augmenting interlacing of 'the theatrical' and 'the public' or 'the civic' (Greig uses both 'public' and 'civic'), and sometimes more particularly, in a growing engagement with 'the real' (by actively understanding and involving the spectator as part of that 'real' and/or by including real people and real stories in his work) and with various forms of participation. The two-hander *Fragile* (2011), written in the context of the infamous austerity policies implemented by the UK's coalition government, required the audience to read one of the characters' lines from a PowerPoint presentation. One of the implications was that the theatrical event (and/or if you like, democracy) could not occur without the spectators' (the public's) participation and voices 'being heard'. *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart* (2011) was staged in pubs where the action took place amongst the spectators' tables (part of our job as spectators was to participate in the design and storytelling by breaking and throwing napkins upwards in order to represent snow falling). Might this suggest that for a non-dysfunctional public sphere to exist, it is necessary to participate in the narratives being told? *Glasgow Girls* (2012) told the true story (which hit the headlines in 2005) of seven Glasgow schoolkids who protested against the planned deportation of her asylum-seeker peer Agnesa Murselaj and her family. The play has enjoyed several showings during this decade, proving that real stories told in fictional 'frameworks' can help maintain a public focus on issues. *The Events* (2013), set in a community centre and based on Anders Breivik's Norway attacks in 2011, used local real choruses (changing for each performance, thus mirroring, for instance, the idea of rotation intrinsic to democratic participation) as a character alongside two professional actors. This co-existence and collaboration on stage is reminiscent of ancient Greek theatre and perhaps suggests that the public sphere needs those qualities as well as 'experts' and 'non-experts' and their dialogue for a better functioning.

As stated, this article focuses on Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* in a version by David Greig, co-produced by the Actors Touring Company and the Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh¹. *The Suppliant Women* opened at the Lyceum Theatre in October 2016 and toured throughout 2016 and 2017. This article analyses this version's very explicit engagement with the idea of the public sphere. In terms of structure, this article first recounts the events in Aeschylus' trilogy. Second, it looks at how *The Suppliant Women* may have contributed and/or may be contributing to a sense of public sphere and in what ways in contemporary U.K. by departing from a brief discussion of the themes of voting, immigration, and women. Next, the article addresses some debates in public sphere theory and argues for the kind of unbounded model of public sphere that Greig's version of Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* seems to suggest by precisely offering undoings of discourses, spaces, and individualisations. The article contends that these undoings occur at least at two (connected) levels. In order to frame the first kind of undoing, the unmarking of theatre as contained, the article uses Christopher Balme's notion of 'open theatrical public sphere', and in order to frame the second, the undoing of elements in Greig's version, the article utilises Greig's concept of 'constructed space'. Before some concluding remarks and a provocation on how we may take the idea of public sphere forward, the article offers several specific examples that suggest *The Suppliant Women* as an open constructed public sphere.

¹ Greig previously wrote other adaptations of ancient Greek plays such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides' *The Bacchae*, respectively *Oedipus the Visionary* (2000) and *The Bacchae* (2007).

1. The Story and Some Relevant Themes to the Public Sphere: Voting, Immigration and Women

Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* (463 BCE), also known for instance as the *Supplices*, *Suppliants*, or *Hiketides*, is the first tragedy of a trilogy possibly called *Danaïds*. In the first tragedy (and also in Greig's version, *The Suppliant Women*), the suppliant women, escaping forced marriage to their cousins in Egypt, arrive at Argos, where they seek asylum. The King Pelasgos organises a vote so that the people of Argos decide whether the girls can stay. The suppliants are granted asylum, but the King is aware that this might bring war. Indeed, in the second tragedy, possibly called *Aegyptii* or *Egyptians*, Pelasgos, the King, is defeated and Argos is decimated by war. The girls are forced to marry their cousins, but kill them on their wedding night (all but one, Hypermnestra). In the third tragedy, arguably called the *Danaïdes* or *Daughters of Danaos*, the trial of Hypermnestra, who spared Lynceus, takes place. During this trial, the girls' champion Artemis, the goddess of virginity and autonomy, is pitted against Aphrodite, the goddess of union and love. Hypermnestra is eventually acquitted and a new royal dynasty in Argos is established, which clearly suggests Aphrodite's triumph over Artemis. Indeed, the trilogy ends with the birth of Hypermnestra and Lynceus' son, Epaphus (see [Winnington-Ingram 1961](#), p. 151). This trilogy was presented at the City Dionysia (held in Athens, the City Dionysia was the most important cultural festival in ancient Greece) where Aeschylus won the competition that year².

Although Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* is a two-and-a-half-thousand-year-old story, the tale in *The Suppliant Women* could not have spoken more to its contemporary context, which includes the ongoing war in Syria (Syria is mentioned in the fourth line of the play), the refugee crisis in Europe and beyond, populism and ethno-nationalism, the 2016 Brexit vote, increased hostility towards immigrants in the wake of the referendum, the anti-immigration-rhetoric-motivated murder of Labour MP Jo Cox a week before the Brexit vote, an abhorrent resurgence of various forms of terrorism, the dismantling of the refugee camp in Calais (France), Donald Trump becoming President of the United States, women's marches in the U.S. and across the globe, allegations of harassment across the globe, forays into the Schengen agreement that allows free movement across its European signatories (e.g., Hungary establishing border controls in the wake of the refugee crisis) and fear of going back to old borders (e.g., Republic of Ireland's border with the U.K.'s Northern Ireland in the context of Brexit), etc.

Suppliant Women, by an author with the reputation of having introduced the second actor in Greek tragedy, arguably contains the first mention of the word 'democracy'. In Athens "theatre and the democratic citizen emerged at the same historical moment, apparently as part of a single process" ([Wiles 2011](#), p. 18). Indeed, "If the date of 463 [BCE] is correct, the play was written at a crucial time for Athens, the events that would lead to the reform of the Aeropagos council" ([Blackwell 2003](#), n.p.) and the full flowering of Athenian democracy. Thus "when Pelasgos insists that a ruler cannot decide for the people (*demos*), the play may well be striking a responsive note in contemporary politics" ([Storey and Allan 2014](#), p. 245). However,

The idea that the Athenians 'invented' the theatre alongside democracy, that they also 'discovered' philosophy and the *polis*, that these texts were the 'first' dramatic scripts in the history of the West, and that the occasion for their performance was an inherently 'democratic', communal, and participatory ritual, providing Athenian citizens with a sense of belonging and political engagement, constitute the most important factors contributing to Greek tragedy's popularity on contemporary European stages. ([Laera 2013](#), p. 3)

This may mean, among other things, the following: "Their 'classical' status offers contemporary Europeans a reassuring way to achieve self-definition and affirm themselves on the global stage" ([Laera 2013](#), p. 3). In other words, if 'we' are to reimagine the public sphere, it is crucial not to mythologise or distort these inherited concepts and to engage with them critically.

² The satyr-play in the tetralogy that included *Danaïds* is *Amymone*.

On 23 June 2016, the U.K. voted to leave the European Union. In the context of the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, the ideas of "the people have spoken", "the will of the people", or 'simply' "the people", etc. were highly recurrent, which connects the present to Aeschylus' play. Although the connection between personality-targeted advertising and electoral outcomes (made evident by the Cambridge Analytica revelations) might seem completely disconnected to the vote in Aeschylus' play, both *Suppliant Women* and *The Suppliant Women* place a vote and the relationship between people and politics centre stage. While the King may manipulate Argos's people's fears in his speech, targeted advertising exploits individual and personal fears and hopes, stifling a sense of the public sphere as it targets users' emotions in order to influence voting patterns. The play is interesting in itself in relation to the public sphere as it includes the participation of some members of the community and suggests a sense of public sphere by dramatising debate and a vote. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg regarding the version's engagement with the public sphere.

The play also seems remarkably contemporary due to its debate on immigration. Indeed, the summer of 2015 came to be known as the beginning of an ongoing refugee crisis in Europe. The basis of the suppliant women's claim is that they descend from the Greek priestess Io. The story goes as follows: Lustful Zeus fell in love with priestess Io. Hera, wife of Zeus, became jealous and turned Io into a cow, and conjured an insect to torment her, which drove her to exile. Io travelled through the Bosphoros, which etymologically means cow-way, through Syria and finally arrived at Egypt. However, Zeus persists and Io becomes pregnant by a mysterious breath or touch. The ancestors of the suppliant women in the play are the Greek priestess Io and Zeus, their ur-father. The question is though, if the Greeks were (and are) famous for their *filoxenia*, their hospitality, even venerating a god protector of suppliants, called Zeus *Hikesios*, why does it seem so essential for the girls to make an argument about indigeneity, about their matrilineal connection to Argos?

In the 5th (and 6th) century BCE, "Following liberation from the tyrants, the reforms of Cleisthenes, and the victories of the Persian wars" (Bakewell 2013), Athens underwent a period of large-scale immigration, in particular during the same decade the trilogy was presented, 460 BCE. While in the early days of the crisis, differences between citizens were mostly made in relation to economic status, as the crisis deepened, Greeks articulated the difference in relation to nationality (see Bakewell 2013), which may be the reason behind the suppliants' emphasis on their autochthonous Greek identity. In ancient Greece, the so-called otherness of immigrants was indeed highlighted during public events. For instance, there is evidence that during the procession that preceded the tetralogy during the City Dionysia, that "While citizens carried the wine [. . .] that belonged to the wine-god, foreign residents identified by red robes carried the water and empty mixing basins, symbolising their inferior status in the social mix of Athens" (Wiles 1997, p. 26).

In fact, the Greeks gave a status to these newcomers. The legal non-citizens, resident foreigners of ancient Greece were called *metics* and their status *metoikia* (see Bakewell 2013). *Metics* had to pay an annual fee to stay in the country, called *metoikion* (see Bakewell 2013). "Among other requirements, they had to acquire a citizen sponsor (*prostates*) and register with the *polemarch*; they were subject to various liturgies, liable for military service under some circumstances, and barred from owning houses and land. In exchange, they received limited legal protection for themselves and their movable possessions" (Bakewell 2013).

This trilogy exploits and perhaps sets the pattern (see Storey and Allan 2014, p. 245) for one of Greece's favourite tragedy sub-genres, a hybrid between the suppliant-play and the rescue-play: "Greek tragedy was particularly fond of the suppliant-play and the rescue-play, with considerable overlap between these. In the former, a character or group takes refuge at a shrine, often but not always at Athens, and begs for sanctuary and assistance. The drama of the play depends on whether sanctuary can be given and at what cost and will inevitably feature the debate which Athenian audiences loved, as the issues behind the request are brought to the open" (Storey and Allan 2014, p. 245). The 'need' to debate the issue of immigration is perhaps the reason behind the popularity of the genre of the suppliant play and indeed of *Suppliant Women*.

The handling of immigration in ancient Greece might limit our interpretation of the play as a play that focuses on the plight of refugees and rather draws attention to “The limits to and perils of civic incorporation” (Bakewell 2013). This is tempered by other moments in the play, for instance, when the King says and asks, “I need to find ways for all of us to survive” and “Isn’t there some way we all can live safely?” (Greig 2016, p. 24). This means that the play does not give answers on how to best organise and protect models of cohabitation in the wake of an identity crisis, xenophobia, and populism, but problematising the issue from many angles. In the context of an ongoing refugee crisis in Europe and beyond, the contemporary spectator of *The Suppliant Women* is not given solutions, but exposed to multiple dilemmas and paradoxes.

Moreover, as critic Claire Alfree puts it, while “When it premiered in 2016, it reverberated deeply with the global refugee crisis dominating the headlines. Now, at a moment saturated in allegations of sexual harassment, it also feels like a female cry of fury against systemic male sexual violence” (Alfree 2017). This passage belongs to the moment when the girls implore Zeus to stop male violence immediately after the King goes off to give his speech to the people of Argos:

Use your force to
Stop male violence.
Take the hearts of men
And plunge them
Into a lake of blood,
Forever tether
The bull of madness
To which men yoke their souls.

(Greig 2016, p. 24)

This one belongs to the moment when the girls imagine their escape as they see the Egyptians arriving:

Oh Argos,
Just watch:
I will step into emptiness.
Witness my protest,
My thousand-foot silence?
I’d rather
You saw me
Smashed over rocks
Than witness me taken
And heart-smashed in marriage.
Let the dogs eat me,
Let the crows peck me,
I’ll be dead but at least I’ll be free
From sadness, from men.

(Greig 2016, p. 24)

In October 2017, the *New York Times* published a story detailing multiple sexual harassment allegations against Harvey Weinstein. The #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns following the Weinstein harassment allegations and campaigns for equal pay at the BBC, for instance, have recently brought the topic of male abuse towards women in the workplace (and beyond) and gender inequality into focus in the public sphere. After the publication of an interview with Carl Woodward, in which Ramin Gray claimed that “the search for who is the Weinstein of British theatre is an honourable search” (Woodward 2017), Gray faces several allegations of sexual misconduct. Around a week before its opening at the Young Vic in November in 2017, the director of a play that allegedly deals with male oppression is accused of harassment. In this specific context, Maddy Costa claimed that, “As collective endeavour, as act of community, in so many ways the text of the *Suppliant Women* is perfect. But

the context disrupts that, undermines it" (Costa 2017). Indeed, although the play does not need to be stripped of its quality and potential due to these allegations, this directly damages clear-cut descriptions of the play as an "Epic, feminist protest song" (Fisher 2016, p. 1118).

In any case, how can we unproblematically call *The Suppliant Women* 'feminist' when just like in Aeschylus' only extant trilogy, the *Oresteia*, at the end of *Danaïds*, 'order' is restored and women are 'kept in place' and devoid of a sense of public sphere? In addition, although the chorus in the version is all-female and they are the protagonist, in ancient Athens, women were not part of the public sphere or considered as citizens; they were relegated to the private realm of the household and did not generally participate in the theatre. Indeed, women's roles in ancient Greek theatre were performed by men in drag, which, according to Sue-Ellen Case, "initiated the image of "Woman" as she is seen on the stage—institutionalized through patriarchal culture and represented by male-originated signs of her appropriate gender behaviour" (Case 1985, p. 321). In other words, it is not only that women did not participate in theatre; theatre was also a vehicle to offer a patriarchal image of women. Although the tragedy's protagonists are female, despite the gender parity regarding *The Suppliant Women*'s direction, music, choreography, design, light, and assistant direction, and even though the person writing this article is a female scholar and spectator, *Suppliant Women* was written by a man, performed by men, watched by men, and *The Suppliant Women* was also 'adapted' by a man. I am not arguing that it should have been written by a woman, but trying to raise awareness about the fact that 80% of adaptations are currently penned by men (see April de Angelis 2018).

David Greig's version of Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* could not have been more timely 'containing', as it does, refugee women escaping male abuse and a referendum on offering them asylum. In both contemporary politics and the play, refugees and referenda are connected. All these themes, voting, immigration, and women coalesce around the terrible murder of Labour MP Jo Cox by a far-right extremist, a woman campaigning for Britain to remain as part of the European Union, and an active voice for the vulnerable in British politics. Although the hatred that took Thomas Mair to kill Cox was not new, given the date of the murder, that is the run-up to the referendum, it is legitimate to question media content during the campaign, which included outright lies and inflamed anti-immigration rhetoric. According to Nancy Fraser, "publicity is supposed to discredit views that cannot withstand critical scrutiny and to assure the legitimacy of those that do" (Fraser 2007, p. 7). However, this discredit never seemed to win over uncritical views and outright lies. Cox's horrific murder proves that views legitimised in the public sphere can become extremely dangerous weapons. Toxic messages instigating an incendiary mood in the public sphere have an impact on people's actions and as such, there is a responsibility to those messages and the media that facilitates their propagation. In this context, what is the value of a theatre preoccupied with the public sphere? How can theatre participate and enact gestures of protest in the public sphere/as public sphere in such a context?

2. An Unbounded Model of the Public Sphere

The *locus classicus* of discussions on the public sphere is Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962; translated into English 1989). Habermas looks at the public sphere historically, observing a shift between "the feudal 'representative' public sphere to a bourgeois rational-critical one during the eighteenth century" (Balme 2014, p. 5). The defining feature of the bourgeois public sphere is "reasoned discourse by private persons on questions of public interest with the aim of achieving rational consensus" (Balme 2014, p. 5). This article, however, follows the opposite view, that of Chantal Mouffe's agonistic approach: "the public space is where conflicting points of view are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation" (Mouffe 2013, p. 202), which is an exercise that *The Suppliant Women* seems to enact masterfully³.

³ This article is not the first on Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* in a version by David Greig that uses an agonistic approach (see Harrop 2018).

Critiques to Habermas's understanding of the public sphere are numerous. In her article "From Deconstruction to Reconstruction: A Habermasian Framework for Contemporary Political Theatre", Paola Botham, who applies an Habermasian framework to several contemporary political British plays, provides us with a solid summary:

Habermas's scheme has been faulted for historical imprecision (romanticising the bourgeois model and failing to recognise simultaneous 'counterpublics'), gender blindness (neglecting the masculinist origin of the public sphere), cultural elitism (rejecting the possibilities offered by the mass media after the so-called structural transformation) and over rationalisation (favouring an abstract rather than an 'embodied' mode of discourse). (Botham 2018, pp. 309–10)

In opposition to Habermas's exclusivity, unification or monolithic sphere, reductive distinction between public and private, rationality, and idealised public participants, Janelle Reinelt highlights inclusivity, polyphony, the potential blurred lines of the private and the public, the acknowledgement of emotions, passions, and affective communication, polyvocal fragmentation, and dissensus. All these criticisms articulate a version of the public sphere much more adequately and compatible to our global present (see Reinelt 2011). When Reinelt raises the question of "the relationship between global, national and local versions of a/the public" (Reinelt 2011, p. 16), in relation to the public sphere, she makes clear that the public sphere is not just a discursive practice but also a spatial one. Taking into account the sense of plurality sketched above, the public sphere is not only a discursive practice and a space, but also takes place at a crossroads between the individual and the collective, the public and the private, people and organisational units.

In this article, I argue that these three aspects of the public sphere appear as contained. Although opinion (and therefore action) is regulated by "the law of affect", to use Alain Badiou's notion (see Pais 2018), the sense of the discursive is not (or 'should not' be) contained any more. Second, despite the spaces of the public sphere having been multiplied exponentially, "Public interest is decided by the neoliberal market" (Pais 2018, p. 14), which urges us to consider an unbounded understanding of the public sphere. In addition, "The post-war swing of the pendulum towards individualism has entailed the erosion of what is variously referred to as the public sphere" (Wiles 2011, p. 18). This means that a theatre attracted by the idea of regaining or strengthening the public sphere will 'need' to find ways to critique senses of toxic individuality and thus to draw attention to the lost element in the equation, "the collective impulse" (Wiles 2011, p. 17). A theatre interested in this rebalancing will also need to recognise smaller and larger units of organisation than the state such as "the local community, the city, the city-state, the nation, the republic, and arguably 'the world'" (Wiles 2011, p. 7) and the plurality of discourses and formats found and used in those interpenetrated, interdependent and interconnected units and individuals across those 'units'⁴. In the essay "Agonistic Politics and Artistic Practices", in the volume *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (2013), Chantal Mouffe argues that "the transformation of political identities can never result from a rationalist appeal to the true interest of the subject, but rather from the inscription of the social agent in a set of practices that will mobilize its affects in a way that *disarticulates the framework* in which the dominant process of identification takes place" (Mouffe 2013, p. 204; emphasis added).

This porous public sphere is incredibly intricate and rich, a dynamic force, the fabric 'we' are responsible for and that affects who 'we' are and allows space for 'us' to ask who 'we' want to become. This is the kind of unbounded and agonistic model of public sphere Greig's version of *The Suppliant Women* seems to suggest by precisely offering undoings of discourses, spaces, and individualisations, and in so doing, enacts a protest against exclusionary, reductive models of exchange and organisation, political engagement, and belonging under globalisation. When one looks at a theatre interested in the public sphere, there are methodological implications: we may go from seeing a play that

⁴ The public sphere's rebalancing of the individual and the collective will need to be critical of both in order to ensure that none of them is essentialised, producing alarming dominant versions of the public sphere.

responded to the world and was presented to spectators to seeing a play as an “ecology of transfers” (Rodríguez 2019, p. 103), which takes part in what we call the public sphere. As such, plays are not the ultimate comment on reality, but an artistic moment in a discussion, a starting point, the continuation of a debate, the amplification of an issue, a trigger, a reminder, a provocation, a tool of the public sphere.

3. The Open Theatrical Public Sphere

Greig’s explicit engagement with the idea of the public sphere occurred as a result of thinking about the role of theatre in ancient Greece in the context of his contemporary version of *The Suppliant Women*. He has, for instance, suggested a parallelism between Athens two and a half millennia ago and Edinburgh, the Athens of the North. He has also claimed that “The Greek vision of a theatre was a place where you came together. Edinburgh is a city of politics, law, science and enlightenment. It needs a public sphere, where we can gather and encounter each other, not behind the avatars of social media, but as humans” (“The Making of The Suppliant Women”, *Lyceum Theatre* 2016). Indeed, “When David Greig announced his inaugural season as artistic director of the Royal Lyceum, he said he wanted the theatre to be a ‘democratic space’ where Edinburgh’s population could ‘gather and encounter each other’” (Fisher 2016, p. 1118). The same goes for *The Suppliant Women*’s director Gray, who has claimed that “Given the current crisis of faith in our democratic institutions, in elections and referenda in particular, it’s salutary to revisit the moment when these ideas were conceived and in the simplest of ways to start to renew our commitment to being together in a shared, civic space” (“The Making of The Suppliant Women”, *Lyceum Theatre* 2016).

Since democracy and the civic as ancient Greek ideals are at times mingled in Greig’s statements, I think that it is useful to point out, as Laera has argued, that “suggestions that the chorus and theatre spectatorship are to be viewed as essentially ‘democratic’ (rather than simply ‘civic’) rituals, have consolidated and disseminated mythologies concerning the legendary genealogical links between theatre and ‘democracy’” (Laera 2013, p. 68). Although it is crucial to continue highlighting twenty-first century distorted visions of ancient Greek Athens’s ideals, as Laera’s book, among others, alerts us to do, this idea of democracy and theatre as civic space traverses Greig’s interests beyond his work on *The Suppliant Women* and its context. Theatre director Vicky Featherstone already pointed out “David’s struggle for theatrical democracy” (Featherstone 2013, p. 219) in the early 2010s. Even earlier, in Greig’s essay “Rough Theatre” (2008), he declared that theatre is “one of the few remaining public spaces” (Greig 2008, p. 219).

Greig and Gray are perhaps using Greek theatre as a vehicle to express an idea that seems to be part of a wider trend in contemporary political theatre. As Florian Malzacher puts it, “[t]oday [. . .] there is a strong desire for a theatre that not only gets a grip on pressing political issues but also becomes a political space, a public sphere in itself” (Malzacher 2011, p. 11). If theatre becomes a public sphere in itself, at least two questions arise: what public sphere is that? Is that part of the public sphere beyond the theatre or is this theatrical public sphere different from them? The other question is, what if the opposite happens, what if the public sphere was/becomes theatricalised and to what end(s)? The theatre can become a public sphere; the public sphere can be (or perhaps is) theatricalised. One might say that both mechanisms can have all sorts of purposes and implications, negative and positive. While theatre as a form that highlights assembly, gathering, sharing a ‘civic’ space (of course, if one has the money to buy the ticket) can be interested in questions of public space/sphere, in protests, for instance, “a public space” might be “transformed into a spectacle of assembly” (Hughes and Parry 2015, p. 301), calling attention to the fact that the shaping of the public sphere from the performative arts is not just to be found in spaces usually assigned to theatre and performance.

These comments all entail the idea of theatre as public sphere and public sphere as theatre; however, in none of them is what makes the relationship between public spheres ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the theatre articulated. In *The Theatrical Public Sphere*, (2014) Christopher Balme importantly talks about the theatrical public sphere in terms of its self-containment or openness. Like Balme, I am concerned with the second, which refers to “those situations where the closed circuit is broken open

and engagement with other public spheres takes place" (Balme 2014, p. x)⁵. Balme's idea implies that we live in a world of concatenated, interconnected, and open public spheres, which includes open theatrical public spheres. They all touch and influence each other. This openness of the public sphere(s) and theatrical public spheres is also reflected in theatrical forms and structures 'within' what Greig calls 'the constructed space'.

4. The Constructed Space and Its Unbounded Elements

In his piece "The Constructed Space" (2017)⁶, where a play is considered as a constructed space—both the "physical building of a theatre" and the "abstract space of a play in performance" are taken into consideration (Greig 2017, n.p.)—Greig reflects on theatre and its potential⁷. According to Greig, "the constructed space is a space which allows an encounter to take place between 'you' and 'I'" (Greig 2017, n.p.). For this to occur, "some space needs to be created: some silence" (Greig 2017, n.p.). The idea of the encounter reminds us of the Levinasian face-to-face encounter. As Alan Read summarises,

Levinasian ethics seeks to replace an ethics based the freedom of the individual (modern) or the realisation of individual potential (ancient) with an ethics oriented entirely towards the other. Performance in relation to Levinas' postmodern ethics encourages the spectator to stop seeing the performance as an exploration of his or her own subjectivity and, instead, to take it as an opportunity to experience an encounter with someone else. Performance, in this view, invites the spectator to assume ethical responsibility for the fragile life of the other. (Read 1995, p. 8)

The constructed space is, for instance, an ethical space. But this 'you' and 'I' are able to encounter in Greig's terms because there is a previous dissolution of 'you' and 'I'. Greig claims, "Inside the space of art, self and other dissolve, and we are briefly able to encounter each other" (Greig 2017, n.p.)⁸. The encounter in the constructed space is not the Levinasian encounter of 'two faces', of two individualities, but of two (or more) undone entities.

In my work on Greig's plays, I have argued that suggesting and promoting the appearance of unbounded discourses, spaces, and entities and provoking unboundedness in relation to the spectator and those concepts is a response to global neoliberalism's promotion of objecthood and individualism. By undoing the boundaries of self and other, a sense of confounding is produced, resulting in a 'collective' of unbounded individuals, of people, of spectators who are capable of being in and out of themselves simultaneously. This perspective may contribute to restoring a sense of the collective to our injured public spheres. Engaging with this multiple unboundedness is a way of evoking the collective, the common as well as the world as common space, where unbounded yet singular beings participate in the public sphere.

More specifically, Greig believes that a play as constructed space does the following things: it "conjures another world, produces a dilemma, demonstrates empathy, community, conviviality, transcendence, participation, and excellence . . ." (Greig 2017, n.p.). In his piece, he discusses how *The Suppliant Women* foregrounds all these essential aspects of the constructed space. But there is one claim that is crucial to this article: "I want to propose that the presence of such constructed spaces of art are essential to the proper functioning of democracy in a city" (Greig 2017, n.p.) because "without access to the constructed space we cannot have true democracy", "Without the constructed space to restore

⁵ To read examples of this open public sphere, see Balme 2017.

⁶ Greig directly takes the title of his piece from W.S. Graham's poem "The Constructed Space" (1955).

⁷ Although I do not have time to delve into this question, Greig talks about other 'realms' in which the constructed space may be encountered such as in heritage, in the wilderness, in a museum, etc. (Greig 2017, n.p.).

⁸ In this article, I embrace the apparent paradox that I use an idea, the constructed space, which uses as its premise a notion of a 'contained' space of art.

us to humanity, democracy merely becomes another form of violence" (Greig 2017, n.p.). Without an art of the public sphere and across public spheres, there is no democracy. Although fraught concepts such as 'true', 'humanity', and 'democracy' are not fully unpacked and theatre/the constructed space is somewhat idealised in Greig's contribution, my interpretation of these statements is that Greig sees the 'space' of art, the 'space' of the story, and the public sphere as related and interpenetrating. This idea turns into the phrase "the constructed space of civic theatre" (Greig 2017, n.p.), a concept that acknowledges such interpenetration, and he argues that *The Suppliant Women* is an example of that. Placing alongside Balme's framework and Greig's idea of constructed space, the article arrives at the idea of open constructed public sphere.

5. Playwright, Libation, Aphrodite's Fragment, Chorus, Making, Communities of Transformation, Outreach

But how is this idea of open constructed public sphere transmitted or at least suggested through *The Suppliant Women*? To begin with, the notion of open constructed public sphere does indeed include, for instance, the playwright in the very equation, which seems to connect with the idea that we are attending "a new era of politically engaged theatre" (Bissell and Overend 2015a, p. 242) where theatre and the playwright are not isolated components. For instance, playwright and theatre-maker Davey Anderson claims the following: "Theatre-makers [. . .] now have to be political commentators, they have to be historians, they have to be members of a specific society and have a public life and view themselves in that way, they can become activists, or can have a journalistic function" (Bissell and Overend 2015b). This has to be thought of in tandem with Greig's job as the Lyceum's Artistic Director.

Attempting to mirror the Athenian practice during the City Dionysia whereby a civic official would read the names of those who sponsored the event and offer a libation to the god in their name, *The Suppliant Women* includes a libation at the beginning of the play by a local dignitary, politician, or prominent local community member who comments on the cost of the production and the funding that permitted its existence and thanks those who made it possible, crucially including the volunteer chorus. However, funding does not cover the production entirely and spectators are humorously asked to contribute by ordering drinks from the bar. This moment shows with clear figures the precarity of the theatre industry and the precarity of theatre's chances to make a difference as/in the public sphere. The person offering the libation somehow suggests the relation between the production and its immediate public sphere as a local dignitary, whose actions may have an impact on those acting and those seated in the auditorium, among others, is present, visible, and exposed. Indeed, the libation establishes a connection between the state and the citizens and, as such, it is evoking a sense of the public sphere.

The libation is, however, framed by actor Omar Ebrahim, who not only plays the roles of Danaos, the suppliant women's father, and the Egyptian herald—having the same performer play the protecting and the threatening male is not at odds with, first, Greig, as he loves to work with contradiction in his work and, second, with the agonistic approach adopted in the play and this article—but also acts as a kind of master of ceremony, as he introduces the libation to a contemporary audience, which may not be aware of this ancient Greek ritual.

At the end of the libation, the local dignitary invites the chorus to leave and get ready. This is followed by the continuation of Omar's framing of the libation and the play. In this last section before the *Parodos*, Omar asks the audience to thank the local dignitary and reads a fragment from the (possibly) third tragedy in the trilogy generally attributed to Aphrodite, in which she speaks in defence of love and marriage. Despite how alluring the use of language may be in this fragment, it is important to remember that these were considered duties in Ancient Greece with fatal consequences for the protagonists of 'our' story.

The very premise of Greek theatre of having citizens perform connects the public sphere 'outside' the theatre with theatre. Omar acting as 'himself', framing the theatrical event and the local libation

giver is not the only figure that allude to the public sphere in this sense. *The Suppliant Women's* chorus is “drawn from the community in which the production is to be performed” (*The Suppliant Women*, n.p.). Gray argues that “Theatre works best when you have a city talking to itself. So, if you have a community chorus drawn from that city, you really plumbed the people of the city to the show” (“The Making of *The Suppliant Women*”, [Lyceum Theatre 2016](#)). This formal decision of having a local community chorus ‘makes’ the young women appear as simultaneously local (they are local young women) and foreign (as they perform the female refugees). However, the young girls may be locals with migrant backgrounds, which may enrich the qualities of the constructed (and yes, agonistic) space. This transcending of bodily limits confounds the borders of who is who, fostering a sense of common plight, interconnectedness and humanity, triggering circuits of empathy and encouraging transcendence. Although one might argue that the local girls’ participation did not generate a genuinely open sense of public sphere or more engaged citizens, it created at least pockets of local citizen participation, amplifying a sense of the common, of doing together, of protest, from Manchester to Hong Kong, where *The Suppliant Women* was shown.

Greig is also interested in the sense of public sphere generated as a result of theatre-making and how that interacts with one’s city: “making theatre can be equally transformative for the people who do it and the wider the pool of opportunity to make theatre that we can give whether it is through our youth theatre or through other participative events or the chorus of *The Suppliant Women*, the more that the Lyceum can be engaged with the people of this city” (“The Making of *The Suppliant Women*”, [Lyceum Theatre 2016](#)). Here, Greig is borrowing the idea from Bertolt Brecht that “theatre is a transformative art, but those it transforms the most, are those who make it” ([Bowie-Sell 2016](#)). The more access and participation, the more transformation. Greig has gone as far as arguing the following:

Personally, I think a very great deal of the problems of democracy might be solved if we were to introduce a system of compulsory national service but instead of going into the army—everyone would have to spend a year in a musical theatre chorus. It’s not easy to be a fascist whilst performing a kick line in Oklahoma. (Greig n.p.)

Although this may sound far-fetched and indeed funny, it has not been tested yet; it may actually have a positive impact on the public sphere.

Indeed, theatre’s very premise is not just doing something together, but also about constantly having to negotiate and empathise with your fellow-makers. In this context, Greig argues that theatre is a machine of empathy because it is only possible with the participation of many people and it is built on collaboration and negotiation, which means that participants have to listen to each other. In this sense, the constructed space is a working, unfinished, processual model of/for the public sphere. Greig argues that theatre “performs an important social function as a ‘constructed space’ of radical empathy” ([Greig 2017](#), n.p.). As Greig claims, “Almost every act in the creation of a piece of theatre requires a person to imagine what it might be like to be in someone else’s shoes” ([Greig 2017](#), n.p.). Once those moments of empathy have occurred in a space that is potentially already a ‘public’ sphere (theatre), they cannot be undone or uprooted. Reimagining the theatrical space also as a public space is a political task.

The play also generated public spheres of theatre-making through outreach programmes such as ‘Unified Women’ (September 2017), a project whereby

Seven young women aged between 18–25 from Lambeth and Southwark travelled to Bulawayo, Zimbabwe working in response to Ramin Gray’s production, with the YV Taking Part team and director, Sasha Milavic Davies. Zimbabwean writer, Noma Damasane, aka. Lady Tshawe worked with the group to produce a piece of work which reflected the shared experiences across the two groups of women, regardless of their geography or local cultures. ([Young Vic 2017](#))

In transcending its limits discursively, spatially, and in terms of individuality as well as in its making, its presentation, and its afterlife, *The Suppliant Women* formally and practically conveys the unboundedness of a potentially workable porous public sphere.

6. Concluding Remarks

This article has argued that Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* in a version by David Greig offers an unbounded model of public sphere that counteracts the prevalent contained model, inviting the spectator to stop seeing discourses, space, and individuals in isolation, but as unmarked towards the practice of a more agonistic, interdependent, and porous public sphere.

Although scholars such as Steve Wilmer would argue that plays such as *The Suppliant Women* "easily lend themselves to the issue of refugees today and have often been appropriated to legitimise the concept of hospitality, a social duty which was revered not only by the ancient Greeks, but which has also been stressed as fundamental to ethics by Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida" (Wilmer 2017, p. 277), and some consider Aeschylus "the father of political drama and feminist protest" (Fisher 2016, p. 1118), this article has also pointed out some of the potential ideologies underlying the play (and the trilogy at large), which is a way of looking at the question of the public sphere when analysing theatre.

Despite how simultaneously truthful, poignant, and assertive the girls' cry against male violence is, *The Suppliant Women*, or rather, the trilogy as a whole, presents us with plenty of ethical and social conundrums. (1) The play represents (immigrant) women as murderous, exoticised, orientalist, and as objects to be desired and protected; (2) The daughters are manipulated by their father, who wants the boys dead because an oracle predicted that he would be killed by one of them; (3) Pelasgos' decision to let the people decide may be driven by his fear of Zeus's punishment if the supplicants remain unprotected, his interest in not being the one to blame if cohabitation is not successful and the guilt and the shame that the girls' potential suicide might bring to Argos if they do not offer them sanctuary⁹; (4) The democratic process is depicted ambiguously: while the people are given the vote, the King offers an intentionally persuasive speech; (5) Marriage is connected to civility and autochthonous values; (6) The girls' insistence to keep their virginity sounds archaic at present; (7) While the version has been read as a play that highlights the plight of refugees, the play explores the dilemma, 'perils', and indeed 'consequences' (negative in this case) of accepting refugees; (8) The people of Argos suggest a sense of paradoxical or conditional hospitality when it is suggested the girls should marry (locally, in my own interpretation) at the end of the play; (9) The closed-circuit sense of play written by men for men where the message for men might be to be less violent to women in order to persuade women to marry them and to have sex with them. Despite some limitations that may pose a threat to the idea of a theatre that claims a porous concept of the public sphere, the approach to the play as an open constructed public sphere is an invitation to more dialogue and new perceptions and emotions about these issues contributing to what 'our' global public sphere might become.

The Suppliant Women did evoke many powerful moments, simultaneously emotional and challenging. While full of warmth and gentleness, the play did channel protest in an artistic format: it evoked a visceral, embodied sense of protest, which might have been more intense to spectators who may identify with a communal female voice raised against male injustice. But the play also evoked wider senses of unfairness. During a moment in which the girls hide on the beach, afraid of their cousins, lit only by torchlight by the sea-shore, it felt like a funeral ritual, perhaps as an unforgettable, profound, plural act of mourning for the perished in the waters and the land. That is, based on my own experience, I would argue that the work generates space for mourning. In these senses, the constructed space might offer gaps that might not open up in daily life. As a spectator, I also felt there was something very genuine in the group of Citizens of Argos/the 'wise' women of Argos welcoming

⁹ The girls' threat to commit suicide is highly resonant at present given that many refugees and asylum seekers in detention centres have self-harmed, gone on hunger strikes, and indeed committed suicide, etc.

the refugees with flowers, dancing, and singing. It was deeply moving to the extent of provoking a sense of ecstasy, which also provokes the destabilisation of individuality as argued for above.

Despite the play's ambiguities and dilemmas, for a fleeting moment, this 'welcome' scene felt like an act from one human being to another, an act of authentic generosity and love. In Derridean thought, "While political hospitality may also need to be answerable to the voice of justice (to ensure that the rights of all are preserved within hospitality) nevertheless it also needs to be guided by a love that moves beyond the self to respond to, take responsibility for, and provide real hospitality for the other" (Secomb 2007, p. 150). *The Suppliant Women* powerfully mobilises this love that moves beyond the self. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes, "love is the extreme movement, beyond the self" (Nancy 2003, p. 249). This sense of ecstasy and transcendence is fostered by the hypnotic, visceral and rhythmic choreography of the show. Sasha Milavic Davies's choreography blended in with the women's chants, spoken text, and dialogue, and the music, which included the use of an aulos (ancient double pipe instrument), importantly contributed to this ecstatic atmosphere.

In this way, the "political potential" seemed to be "in the space it offer[ed] the audience to experiment with ways of viewing, with imagining oneself differently and ultimately with citizenship" (Peters 2015, p. 46). As Caridad Svich puts it, "If we were to stage an audience revolution it must need be one of listening anew as well as seeing anew" (Svich 2016, p. xvi). The version made me see and listen, and perceive anew in my spectating experience and get out of the confines of my body. I conclude therefore that the play suggests a shattering of the individual. It encourages 'us' to see 'ourselves' in shatters and do it 'together' in an open, constructed, and 'public' sphere.

7. A Provocation

The suppliant branches that the girls hold at the beginning of the play are decorated perhaps with white cotton, but also with plastic cups and other plastic rests, maybe suggesting plastic pollution and offering a wider sense of crisis and public sphere, one that should perhaps 'contain' a sense of the environmental and move away from anthropocentric definitions of the public sphere, when eight billion metric tons of plastic end up in the planet's oceans each year.

In this sense (of a post-human public sphere), what *The Suppliant Women* might be doing is allowing space for 'us' to learn bodily and mentally together that this is who 'we' are: vulnerable, needy, shattered beings, among other entities, in a fragile environment. This crystallises well in a moment during the performance when the women draw the shape of Io and then that of her calf on the stage floor. As Elaine Aston claims:

Although highly evocative and reminiscent of woman-identification core to a cultural-feminist aesthetic, the collective image-making urged an ecologically inflected perspective: the coexistence or alliance of human and non-human life forms. Thus, the reclaiming of the maternal was enmeshed in the eco-grammar of human and non-human relations. This lent weight to the women's supplication as a plea to protect not only their matrilineage, but all life forms (Aston 2017)

and therefore, the environment. In this sense, the play might get 'us' out of 'our' anthropocentric and anthropomorphic selves and see and feel life beyond not only the 'confines' of 'our' bodies, but also beyond the human.

As Thomas Riccio puts it, "theatre can contribute, if not lead, becoming a gathering, the collective brain, and the spirit of a community" (Riccio 2016, p. 109). Following Riccio (and taking into account Greig's very explicit interest and engagement with shamanism; see Rodríguez 2019), community of place in the indigenous world, which is taken here as a model, means the co-existence of humans, animals, plants, the climate, the spirits, the ancestors, and the environment in general. In this sense, theatre is the porous 'place' in which that community of place is summoned and perhaps gathered. A theatre interested in an ecological sense of public sphere, as *The Suppliant Women* seems to be, would be a theatre that celebrates and acknowledges all the participants in the community of place.

Funding: This article was supported by “British Theatre in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis, Affect, Community,” a research project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and by FEDER (European Union) (FFI2016-75443). See <http://www.ub.edu/cbtbarcelona>.

Acknowledgments: Many thanks to all of those who have participated in conversations about *The Suppliant Women*.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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