

Heard and Seen

'THAT BEST OF ALL THINGS, GREEK'

'Ancient tragedy, ancient tragedy', insists Cavafy somewhere, 'is as holy and wide as the universal heart'. Of late this holiness has demonstrated its universality beyond the printed page, beyond the stone amphitheatre or the wooden stage, to make its impact all over again from the cinema screen; an impact, moreover, which is surprisingly unweakened by its transference to so unfamiliar a medium.

The process has not long been at work: *Medea* and her children, it is true, made a fleeting appearance in *Never on Sunday* when, Melina Mercouri explained, in spite of all appearances to the contrary they were really on their way to the beach. And when the bodies littering the stage rose to acknowledge the applause it was not easy for Dassin, as the American professor, to prove her wrong. The first serious example, however, of the new wave of adaptations from the great Greek dramatists (though not the first to reach this country) was probably the *Electra* of Michael Cacoyannis, which won a prize at Cannes in 1962; then came another *Electra*, that directed by Ted Zarpas, which was shown in Venice in 1962 and in the London Film Festival later last year; these two, together with *Antigone*, directed by George Tzavellas, seen earlier this spring in London, are straight-forward presentations of the original tragedy. *Phaedra* directed by Jules Dassin, is a modern transposition of the play, with details of the plot significantly manipulated to suit the twentieth-century setting and the geographical expansion of the action.

I have not, unfortunately, yet been able to see the Zarpas *Electra*, which stars the famous Greek classical actress, Anna Synodinou, as *Electra* and is, it is widely agreed, a revelation. This film avoids any personal angle – it is simply a magnificently photographed version of an actual performance of the play by the Greek National Theatre in the great stone amphitheatre of Epidaurus; the same stage, incidentally, where Melina Mercouri saw *Medea* and which she so assiduously haunted that the sign 'Closed owing to Greek Tragedy' was hung on her door for the duration of the festival. Photographed performances are not always successful, as we have learned only too well from some ballet films, but this appears to be an exception, from all accounts. Let us hope it achieves commercial showing in this country before the year is out.

Michael Cacoyannis has always been, in my opinion, one of the most odd, idiosyncratic, uneven and fascinating of directors. His best films – *Stella*, *A Matter of Dignity* – have a flavour that is a remarkable mixture of warmth and astringency; his worst – *Our Last Spring*, or *The Wastrel* – are still worth seeing for the occasional unforgettable sequence, like the children's funeral games in *Our Last Spring* or some of the seascapes in *The Wastrel*. For myself, I found

Electra to be a wonderfully moving experience. The story, with its terrible archaic simplicity and the chain of sin, revenge and guilt endlessly repeated, makes an exemplary script – strong and clearcut, with the action rising climactically at precisely the right intervals. Cacoyannis has been exceptionally intelligent, I feel, in his use of the Chorus; nothing to be seen here of the band of greybeards or the chanting voices of assorted ladies, but simply scattered groups of people who happen to be about at the time. What could be better than the black-clad women suddenly frozen in their working stations on the hillside, alarmed and full of forebodings as they watch the actions of their betters, in a calm as resigned as it is hopeless; or the same women supporting Electra under the stippled shade of the olive trees? Landscape and chorus, together, combine to form a character quite as significant as Clytemnestra or Electra and more significant, one feels, than the young Orestes so pitilessly driven to his fate by his sister. The way in which the profile of Irene Pappas – not really beautiful but with something much better than beauty in the strong fierce features – is balanced against the actually far more girlish good looks of Yannis Bertis as Orestes is one of the more brilliant touches in the casting. The inevitability, the inexorability, as Cavafy so rightly said, of the Greek stories such as *Electra* make one feel suddenly possessed of some magic key to the human predicament. Played out against the stark hillsides, photographed by Walter Lassally in the ineffable lucidity of the Greek sunlight, this episode in the story of the house of Atreus is at once painful and peace-giving – a perfect example of Aristotle's catharsis. Cacoyannis told us, in his press conference at Cannes, that he had set out to make a film in which the landscape was the dominant; this he has done, but he has done much more also, and it is exhilarating to see how easily the cinema adapts to the hieratic.

Antigone is far less of a director's piece than *Electra*; it is a much more conventional version of Greek tragedy, as we know it theatrically, than (say) the great sweeping sequences of Clytemnestra's journey in search of Electra. We begin with Thebes on the morning of the battle, a confusion and a muddle which is given focus by the veiled, troubled figure of Irene Pappas as Antigone, hurrying through the cluttered streets. Creon is played by Manos Katrakis, who was the shepherd in *Electra*, and the duel between conscience and law is worked out with a dignity and an urgency that quite transcends the occasional mishaps of static chorus, over-bearded elders or soldiers wearing their greaves with something less than assurance. There are some great moments: the long shot of Polyneices' body, lying far below, abandoned in the dusty plain; Antigone's approach to the cave which is to be her tomb; the cantering white horses god-like in the ruck of the citizenry. The device of circumventing the endless catastrophe in the messenger's tales by flashback and disembodied voice works very well, but the Chorus is far less well deployed than in *Electra*. The difference between the two films is the difference between the achievement of experience and the achievement of promise. One senses the competence, the self-confidence of Cacoyannis where one is uncomfortably aware that Tzavellas is working out

his effects as he goes along. Some come off wonderfully well; others are less happy, but the miracle of Sophocles carries the whole thing through to one's sigh of release as Creon stumbles through the Lion Gate for the last time, indescribably alone.

Phaedra, directed by Jules Dassin, could hardly be more unlike these two films in its approach to Greek tragic themes and yet, in spite of the febrility and indeed the vulgarity of the treatment, it is fascinating to see how in the end the intrinsic nobility of the story triumphs over all the chi-chi of the translation into terms of the Mediterranean millionaire set and we are left, almost unwillingly, with the feeling once again that 'nothing is here for tears, nothing to wail'. Melina Mercouri as a Dior-clad Phaedra who not only loves but seduces the pseudo-Hippolytus stepson played by Anthony Perkins, gives a bravura performance whose outsize emotions somehow do not offend, even when they should. Raf Vallone as the shipping magnate husband is both credible and sympathetic – what a good actor he has grown into – and Dassin's evident infatuation with his locations mean that we benefit by the loving emphasis given to the incomparable landscape with and without figures.

The treatment of chorus here, necessarily complicated by the modern transposition, is interesting and often quite successful, as in the scene on the quay when the news of the shipwreck comes through. But the dialogue on the whole is unconvincing and nobody could call this a really good film: it is a picture in poor taste with some admirable things in it, and well worth seeing if you are collecting an anthology of Greek myth on film, to collate with your anthology of Cocteau and Anouilh on stage. But the over-riding conclusion with which one is left is that it is almost impossible to erode the seriousness or attenuate the nobility of a Greek story.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER

IMAGES FOR THE CHURCH

Having recently encountered the scorched and blackened 'Assemblages' of the American artist John Latham there, I nowadays approach the Bear Lane Gallery, in Oxford, with a certain caution. One can never be quite sure what is going to happen next. This month's exhibition, *Modern Art and the Church*, sounded like another challenge. On the earlier occasion, a few people were, I believe, rather indignant when they discovered what Mr Latham had been up to, with all that old gas-piping and burned secondhand books. But no one had to be carried out kicking and screaming as once they might have been. By now most of us have made our peace with Modern Art and the Modern Artist. But when one puts Modern Art and the Church together in the same room, one becomes aware how uneasy their alliance has always appeared. The problem is to see why this should be so. It is not that there is anything in the present exhibition which would *upset* one. One almost wishes there were. But problem