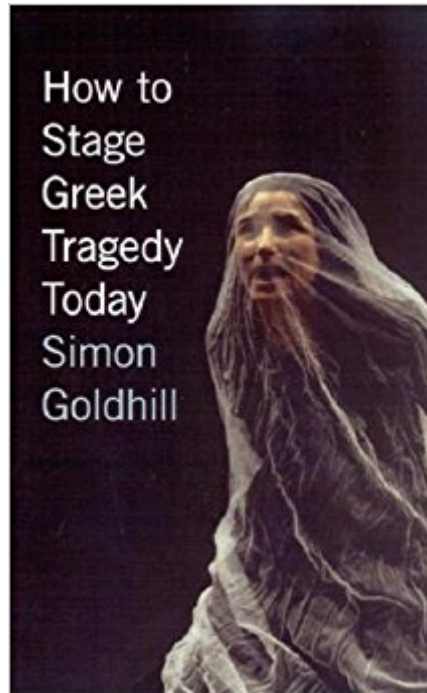




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# How To Stage Greek Tragedy Today



## Synopsis

From the stages of Broadway and London to university campuses, Paris, and the burgeoning theaters of Africa, Greek tragedy remains constantly in production. This global revival, in addition to delighting audiences, has highlighted both the promise and the pitfalls of staging ancient masterpieces in the modern age. Addressing the issues and challenges these performances pose, renowned classicist Simon Goldhill responds here to the growing demand for a comprehensive guide to staging Greek tragedy today. In crisp and spirited prose, Goldhill explains how Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles conceived their works in performance and then summarizes everything we know about how their tragedies were actually staged. The heart of his book tackles the six major problems facing any company performing these works today: the staging space and concept of the play; the use of the chorus; the actor's role in an unfamiliar style of performance; the place of politics in tragedy; the question of translation; and the treatment of gods, monsters, and other strange characters of the ancient world. Outlining exactly what makes each of these issues such a pressing difficulty for modern companies, Goldhill provides insightful solutions drawn from his nimble analyses of some of the best recent productions in the United States, Britain, and Continental Europe. One of the few experts on both Greek tragedy and contemporary performance, Goldhill uses his unique background and prodigious literary skill to illuminate brilliantly what makes tragedy at once so exciting and so tricky to get right. The result will inspire and enlighten all directors and performers—not to mention the growing audiences—of ancient Greek theater.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Simon Goldhill’s new book is enthralling. A Æœcan’t put down Æœ and a Æœ forever reread. Æœ His detailed analyses of so many past productions are rare and exciting. His unfolding of the Greek texts and the many different translations is both instructive and exhilarating. He reveals the contradictions within the specific structures of the characters, and also of the chorus, in a way that every actor will be grateful for. I never saw any of the productions he describes, explains, and analyzes, but I have an unforgettable second-hand memory of them, thanks to his own knowledge and keen joy in his subject.” (Vanessa Redgrave)

“Priceless. . . . [Goldhill’s] approach is at once deeply informed by the best academic scholarship and no less deeply rooted in a commonsense understanding of what works on stage. The result is one of the most instructive and lucidly written books about theater to have been published in recent years. No one whose interest in drama is more than merely casual should pass it by.” (Terry Teachout Commentary 2007-12-14)

“Goldhill proffers a refreshingly light-footed guide to Greek tragedy for the would-be director or actor, uncluttered by the minutiae of scholarship and yet underpinned by authority. . . . The sections on the individual plays are lucid and highly informative.” (Finoa Macintosh Literary Review)

“It isn’t often we see the idiom ‘How to’ prefacing the title of an academic study. In this sense, Simon Goldhill’s no-nonsense *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, is singular, but in more important ways such as organization and utility, Goldhill’s book is equally impressive.” (Timothy Dugan Bryn Mawr Classical Review)

“A thoughtful and eminently readable contribution to performance criticism and reception studies amply illustrated by many of the major productions of Greek tragedy over the last generation. . . . [Goldhill] brings a sensitive ear and eye not only to the literary and cultural aspects of Greek tragedy but also to the texts as scripts for performance. This study will be highly useful to theatre practitioners, to experts in the field, and to beginning actors and students. With its wealth of examples drawn from modern productions . . . it is, like Greek tragedy itself, both timely and timeless.” (James T. Svendsen *Text and Presentation*)

“Generally Goldhill is an excellent guide to the plays he discusses, both ancient and modern. . . . Goldhill’s book offers valuable help to those unfamiliar with staging Greek tragedy.” (Rush Rehm *Classical World*)

Simon Goldhill is professor in Greek literature and culture at the University of Cambridge. He is the author of many books, including *Love, Sex & Tragedy*, also published by the University of Chicago

Press.

This book is fabulous! It gave me a reference point or vantage point for appreciating Greek drama since I have never studied this formally. If you enjoy reading Greek tragedy, there are many books by scholars written in modern times which can open up your understanding of these Classics in ways which you cannot anticipate. I highly recommend this supplementary literature in general, and this is one of the best I have come across recently.

Get it. Read it.

Excellent book on staging Greek tragedy for the modern audience. Goldhill is a clear and elegant writer and a learned expert on Greek tragedies. He can both read and write (translate) the ancient Greek and brings that knowledge into his analysis of how to stage the ancient works for contemporary audiences. His intention is to make the techniques and characters in ancient drama that seem strange to contemporary actors and audiences work more successfully. For example, he discusses the central role of the chorus in ancient productions and explains how Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides intended them to be used. Goldhill then compares how effectively (and not and why) various acting companies in the UK, US, and Europe have presented (or mis-represented) choruses. His examples are numerous and very helpful. Similarly, Goldhill compares numerous translations and points out how the standard academic translations (e.g. Lattimore and Grene) are rarely used for productions because their word choices are less effective in action than they are when simply read. He provides numerous examples of translations used by contemporary productions around the world, and again compares elements of the more successfully used stage translations to those which work -- engage, entertain, interest -- less effectively. He also talks about how contemporary actors can approach interpreting and representing the many divine and mythic characters that have few or no equivalents in modern theatre (outside of Shakespeare). He again provides historical context and many examples. I would not agree with the other reviewer here that Goldhill recommends forgoing period costumes (I don't remember him saying it at all, and many photos of contemporary productions used in the book feature actors in period dress), and I wouldn't agree that his examples mostly from cutting-edge troupes or for them -- his suggestions and interpretations seem instead to be eminently practical and well-reasoned. I thought this book would enlarge my understanding of the plays themselves and help me visualize some scenes better, and it has done both. Excellent book; very highly recommended.

While reading a number of Greek tragedies, I picked up "How to stage Greek tragedy today" hoping that it would help me visualize performances of the works I was reading. Based on its title, I thought it might be appropriate for the university classics department or even high school drama club that wanted to competently stage a Greek tragedy. I guess I should have learned by now to not judge a book by its title. Actually, the book's intended audience is the professional stage company planning a modern, cutting edge production. The emphasis is on modern as the book focuses on productions from the 1990s to the early 2000s. In fact, in its opening pages, the author basically scoffs at 19th century productions in robes and amphitheaters, so there is scant information on masks or period costumes, and relatively little information even on stage movements. On the other hand, there is substantial historical background, analyses of major scenes from several plays, and even original, usually literal, translations used as a starting point for evaluating other translations. The challenges of acting and adapting for a proscenium bound stage are also covered in depth. The six topics that author used as chapters for organizing the book seemed to work well (see the Look Inside feature for the table of contents and introduction). What the book primarily lacked was any consideration of productions using period costume and sets. If that still works for Shakespeare, why should it not also work for Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides? Instead, the author's basic assumption is that productions in the near future will continue in the vein of current productions that aspire to make these plays "relevant" to the modern audience by using modern military costumes, slave women paraded naked except for masks, and even a gospel choir or a chorus of the wounded in wheelchairs in place of a more traditional chorus. It should be noted that the author did not find that all of these devices were used successfully. My background in the performing arts is in classical music, and specifically solo classical guitar. When I perform Bach, the resulting music is 97% Bach and 3% my phrasing and ornamentation because I recognize the humble level of my efforts relative to a great work of art and the genius of Bach. Why does present day theater presume to do the reverse so that a performance is 80% production and 20% the author's work? The audience for Elektra is not Joe Six-Pack, so why expend so much effort on too often strained, preachy or trite "relevancy"? Back to the book--for the theater professional or those up to a bit of intellectual challenge, it may well be the best book on the subject of staging Greek tragedy today, especially if you've bought into the current of style of productions. Finally, if there is a revised version of this book in the future, I have two suggestions. First, add a chapter on music, which was a major part of performances. Since no scores exist, it will be a stretch, but surely some appropriate guidelines can be suggested. And second, a better title for the book might be "Numerous things to consider when

staging Greek tragedy today". It's not as catchy, but it would be more accurate.

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