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Performing Epic Now

In 2002 the Algerian theatre designer Abd'Elkader Farrah gave an account of his early life as a child in North Africa in the late 1920s and early 1930s:

> …the market… the public storyteller called the *Maddah*, the *Rawi*, the *Gawal* or the *Hakawati*, depending on which part of the Arab world he is active… His troupe consisted of three percussion players, two flute players, two children who collected money during pauses or acrobatic interludes. As for the actor-manager—I mean the Storyteller—he had a monkey for an occasional partner, two sticks as devices to trigger the audience imagination and a piece of rope. The two sticks could suggest paddles for a river crossing, a roof when held over the head, horses in dancing or frenzied mood, a pen for writing… His clothes were covered with brightly coloured patches; a sort of Harlequin of the Italian *Commedia*. Little by little, the child I was became aware of a breathing phenomenon: the circle of spectators was like a rib cage, breathing in and out depending on the performance of the Storyteller… My awakening to theatre started in the open air.[1]

As Farrah realized much later, this was also his first encounter with performance akin to that in ancient Greece: the audience members, who literally amplified the story in the Ksar el-Boukhari marketplace, were like an ancient chorus; and the storyteller/actor manager was analogous to an ancient bard or, in many ways, a Greek tragic protagonist.

[1] 'An Algerian's Ventures into Ancient Greek Territory', APGRD Public Lecture, 30 January 2002. Transcript and video recording of the lecture are housed in the Farrah Collection at the APGRD, University of Oxford.

Performing Epic or Telling Tales. Fiona Macintosh and Justine McConnell, Oxford University Press (2020).

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780198846581.001.0001

Farrah went on to explain that it was his sister, Halima, who knew by heart all the books of *One Thousand and One Nights*, who 'presented to us, night after night, for months, without censorship, the most extraordinary mirror of life'. And it was, he added:

> …Halima's influence [that] laid the foundation for many future discoveries such as Hesiod, Homer, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Chinese epic, *Journey to the West*, the epic of Gesar of Ling in Tibet, the Hindu *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as well as other myths and legends from Iran, Australia, Africa and the Americas.

It was this early formative experience of theatrical storytelling in the marketplace in Algeria, according to Farrah, that provided him with the rich and variegated design palette that made him the mid-twentieth-century's stage designer of choice. It was this too that underpinned his extraordinary career trajectory from Ksar el-Boukhari to Paris, to Strasbourg, and eventually to Stratford-on-Avon. Farrah worked for nine years in Strasbourg with the renowned theatre director, Michel Saint-Denis; and when Peter Hall invited Saint-Denis and Peter Brook in 1961 to join the newly formed Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford-on-Avon, Farrah was appointed Resident Associate Designer, a position he held until 1991.

In 2002, when he was well into retirement, Farrah's comments might have struck some audience members as rather outmoded—technological wizardry and fragmented or eschewal of narrative altogether were rapidly becoming the staples of the commercial and the fringe stages respectively. In a postmodern world where the grand narrative was suspect, all narrative in the theatre was increasingly being viewed in certain quarters as no different from the artifice of the 'well-made play' and thus inadequate in the face of contemporary uncertainties. In order to understand how far thinking about theatre had moved from Farrah's personal insights, it is necessary to look again at some well-worn earlier context.

The early 1950s is often seen as the decisive moment in this anti-narrative turn, when the avant-garde in, music, the visual arts, and theatre pioneered alternative modes of representation: with John Cage's notorious *'4.33'* or four minutes and thirty-three seconds of silence (1952),

Ad Reinhardt's non-figurative, monochromatic 'black paintings' (1953–1967), and Samuel Beckett's avowedly anti-teleological *Waiting for Godot* (1953), each art form promoted new ways of seeing and, especially, 'experiencing' the world.

The dethroning of the linear logic of a text, and of the 'classical' texts in particular, constituted a serious programme of activity in the post-war German-speaking world. The 'classical' texts, which had been held to enlighten, and in turn, 'civilize' humanity across the millennia, and especially so in the German-speaking world, had been readily appropriated by the Nazis in the 1930s to underpin their own ideology: in 1936 Aeschylus' *Oresteia* had notoriously been reduced to a battle between the Aryans (Olympian gods) and the *Untermenschen* (Furies). The ancient texts, it seems, had turned out to have nothing inherently good or bad within them: instead, as the pioneers of *Rezeptionstheorie*, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hans Robert Jauss, and Wolfgang Iser went on to argue in the 1960s and 1970s, it was the readers, the receivers, the consumers of texts, who determined their affect.[2] For the German theatre director, Peter Zadek, '*Klassiker Zerstrümmerrung*' ('demolition of the classics') was essential in order to liberate the post-war generation from its anodyne and apolitical worldview.[3] 'Demolition', in this instance, entailed fragmentation of the Greek and Roman texts; and, occasionally as in the *Antikenprojekt I* at the Berlin Schaubühne in 1974 under the overall direction of Peter Stein, it entailed a literal *sparagmos* ('tearing apart') of a classical text, above all, in Klaus Michael Grüber's production of Euripides' *Bacchae*.[4]

By 1999 this turn away from teleological narrative in performance had received its most subtle and influential formulation in Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*. According to Lehmann, the turning point in performance can be dated from the 1970s and the 'mediatization' culture, when a split between, on the one hand, (text-based) drama and, on the other, theatre that embraces performance in the broadest terms is perceptible. In postdramatic theatre, Lehmann argues, the dominance of the text is successfully and routinely challenged (as it had been earlier in the 1920s and 1930s by Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty); and

[2] Holub (1984). [3] Fischer-Lichte (2005), 236. [4] Fischer-Lichte (2004).

now the text emerges as just one element among many in the performance. The playwrights of postdramatic theatre—such as Heiner Müller, Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane, Suzan-Lori Parks, Robert Wilson—now expect spectators (almost as if they were to become Augusto Boal's 'spect-actors') to fill in the gaps in their disjunctive, non-linear narrative and multi-layered scripts, just as Iser's Reader-Response theory had explained was the role of the reader during the reading process.[5]

Against this background of profound scepticism towards storytelling in the works designated by Lehmann as postdramatic, Farrah's account in 2002 of the roots of a profound theatrical experience may well have sounded decidedly old-fashioned. But to an audience of classicists, for whom the links between storytelling and performance were once again providing the focus of serious scholarship, Farrah's words rang surprisingly true. Ancient Greece had recently been delineated a performance culture generally and ancient epic and lyric, in particular, proclaimed to employ the medium of *mimesis* and thus to enjoy complementary performance traditions to tragedy.[6] Almost one third of the Homeric epics are in direct speech and so the differences between 'epic' and 'drama' were much less distinct than they have been considered in the modern world.[7] The rhapsodes of ancient Greece, *pace* Plato in the *Ion*, didn't reproduce virtuosic, decadent copies of a masterly 'Homer'; on the contrary, as they engaged in a mimetic art form, they too had the potential for re-creation in performance.[8] Such innovations, developed from the interaction between poet and audience, were carefully balanced with the impression of 'tradition' that is characteristic of epic.[9]

Classicists were not alone in their fascination with the links between narrative and performance at the dawn of the new millennium. There was at this time plenty of resistance to any avowedly anti-narrative turn in performance and indeed plenty of evidence that epic narratives were beginning to make a comeback on the stage; and this chapter examines some of the reasons behind the return to narrative during this period.

[5] Lehmann (1999). Cf. Iser (1990; 1991).

[6] On performance culture, see Cartledge (1997) and Goldhill (1997); for epic performance, see Nagy (1996), 61.

[7] Griffith (2007), 19; Gould (2001). See further, Chapter 2 this volume.

[8] Nagy (1996), 82.

[9] Scodel (2002).

New Technologies

One notable, and early, dissenter from this rejection of narrative in the British theatre is Mike Alfreds, who maintains that narrative 'refreshes theatre by restoring it to its roots'.[10] In 1975 Alfreds founded the pioneering theatre company, Shared Experience, with whom he went on to rework innumerable traditional stories, including *One Thousand and One Nights*. According to Alfreds, when the narrative from an artwork not originally designed for the theatre—say, from an ancient epic or a modern novel—is reworked for performance, it affords opportunity for radical experimentation.[11]

Peter Brook's landmark 1985 *Mahabharata*, which was revived more recently in 2016, albeit in condensed form, in Paris and London as *Battlefield*, and *A Ramayan Odyssey* by the British-based Tara Arts theatre company in 2001, both provide ample evidence of epic's potential for radical experimentation. Even companies often seen as decidedly post-dramatic have turned to epic: Forced Entertainment's improvisational *And On The Thousandth Night…* (2000) takes its inspiration from *One Thousand and One Nights*, but focuses on the process of storytelling rather than on the narratives themselves.[12] The company's very name, Forced Entertainment, resonates with Scheherazade's predicament in the epic; and this production, commissioned by Festival Ayloul in Beirut, homed in on the relationship between audience and performer that is key not only to postdramatic theatre but to oral traditions as well.[13] This special relationship not only entranced Farrah as a child as he listened to his sister's retelling of these tales; the power of the performer and the important role played by the spectator in live performances, of course, furnishes the central plot of *One Thousand and One Nights* itself.

[10] Alfreds (2013), 6. [11] Alfreds (2013), 100.

[12] On Forced Entertainment as postdramatic, see Jürs-Munby (2006), 4–5, 8–9, 11–12. See further https://www.forcedentertainment.com/projects/and-on-the-thousandth-night/ and Turner and Behrndt (2016), 196–7. *And On the Thousandth Night* (2000) draws on one section of their twenty-four-hour epic *Who Can Sing a Song to Unfrighten Me?* (1999). See further, p.8 below.

[13] See, for example, Reynolds (1999) on audience interaction in twentieth-century performances of the Egyptian oral epic, *Sīrat Banī Hilāl*.

In recent decades storytelling, in a form more resonant with Farrah's recollections of the storytellers in the marketplaces of Algeria than with most theatrical productions, has been enjoying something of a revival in Britain and the United States. Storytellers, performing alone without costumes or props, relying on the dynamism of their vocal performance and the informal relationship that they nurture with an audience,[14] mark both a return to narrative and a dependence on the participation—the co-authorship even—of the audience. Positioning themselves between narrative and audience, the storyteller is both raconteur and teacher: if drawing from myth and folklore, they explain unfamiliar elements and bridge the temporal distance between audience and characters without closing it up entirely, so that the distance remains, just as it did in performances of epic in antiquity.

Unlike a traditional actor, the storyteller does not embody a character; they are present as themselves. Standing apart from the narrative, like the actors in Brecht's Epic Theatre, the storyteller assesses the characters of the story alongside the audience. In this way, as Michael Wilson has argued, the storyteller adopts the *Gestus* required of Brechtian actors, rather than embodying, as the Stanislavskian actor would, the character proper.[15]

Among the most well-known of those in the anglophone world who retell classical myths are Hugh Lupton and Daniel Morden, who have together performed their own retellings of the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Despite the centrality of a live engagement with the audience in Lupton and Morden's performances, they have also released recordings of their live performances; and more recently, the Canadian storyteller Jeff Wright has embarked on a podcasting enterprise, which alters the dynamics of performance and engagement in even more complex ways.

The recent resurgence of interest in narrative *per se* has been in part fuelled by the new technologies, where co-authoring of content, in, say, fanfiction and hypertext fiction, and from multiple, often global, locations simultaneously, parallels the performances of epic narratives in

[14] Wilson (2006), 2. [15] Wilson (2006), 48–55.

recent years.[16] The 'open-world' video games created by the games industry have furnished new non-linear ways of telling stories, which allow players to create their own plot lines. Immersive theatre companies, like Punchdrunk, are not only seeing the parallels between their own performance events and video games; they are also looking increasingly towards the games industry to provide new ways of allowing the spectators to become authors/playwrights of their own, bespoke shows.[17]

For over fifty years, long-running television series, written by a team of writers to meet the demands of market forces, have echoed the way oral poetry was created in their deployment of familiar characters and episodes and the anonymity of their authorship, as well as in the way they reflect the 'imagination of a people'.[18] It is often claimed that the advent of the box set has encouraged engagement with very long plot lines, which are now possible to experience in one sitting, as readers might have read a novel in the past.[19] The nineteenth-century triple-decker novel was regularly considered the 'modern' epic for the Victorian age, or it was proffered as an explanation as to why there were no longer epic poems on the scale of the ancient models in nineteenth-century poetry in English.

The twenty-first century has seen epic move not only to the stage or the screen, but also to the secluded realm of a listener's personal headphones in the form of narrative podcasts. The term 'podcast', coined by Ben Hammersley in 2004 when the iPod was popular, has outlived the device from which its name is derived, but the medium itself is flourishing, constituting one of the newest forms of storytelling. Its roots lie in broadcast radio, but the podcast has some distinct features that set it apart: most strikingly, its on-demand feature and the way that the audience controls exactly when and where they listen, even while the form and tone self-consciously foster a sense of intimacy between presenter

[16] On 'hypertext' fiction, pioneered by Michael Joyce and Stuart Moulthrop in the late 1980s, where the story is randomly accessed and not read successively on a static page; and on 'fanfiction', which involves multiple authorship, see Thomas (2015).

[17] See Judge (2019), including her interview with Felix Barrett, Creative Director, Punchdrunk.

[18] Esslin (1980), 207.

[19] See, e.g. Mark Lawson, 'Thinking Outside the Box-Set: How Technology Changed the Story', BBC Radio 4, originally broadcast December 2017.

and listener that replicates live performance.[20] The narrative podcast is not only a new mode of dissemination; as its creators are demonstrating, it has the potential to be a new form of storytelling.

While many podcasts adopt a chat show or magazine format, it is those that set out to narrate a story which evoke ancient performances of epic poetry so strikingly. Although this is most apparent, and self-conscious, in narrative podcasts that take classical antiquity as their subject, it is not limited to Graeco-Roman narratives. The podcast format opens up a range of new possibilities: no longer constrained by the time limits granted by performance venues or by the attention span of their audience, the storyteller has a new-found autonomy, as does the audience who chooses when and where they listen and for how long.

Canadian storyteller Jeff Wright, for example, continues to perform tales from the Homeric epics in live venues, but has also created *Trojan War: The Podcast* (2016) and *The Odyssey: The Podcast* (2019).[21] His *Trojan War* is twenty-five hours long, divided across twenty episodes which he exhorts his audience to listen to in sequence; his *Odyssey* lasts twenty-three hours. However, unlike durational theatre such as Jan Fabre's *Mount Olympus: To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy* (2015), Robert Wilson and Philip Glass' *Einstein on the Beach* (1976), or Forced Entertainment's twenty-four-hour epic *Who Can Sing a Song to Unfrighten Me?* (1999) from which *And On The Thousandth Night…* was taken, podcasts draw in the accidental audience too. Only someone with a pre-existing interest in either postdramatic theatre or the subject of the specific play is likely to buy a ticket for a durational work that lasts twenty-four hours (as, famously, Fabre's and Forced Entertainment's productions often do), and then remain there for the entire show.[22] A podcast demands no such commitment, neither financial nor temporal, from its audience: free to download, podcasts can be dipped into and discarded or binged on durationally without the audience making any prior commitment to

[20] On the importance of this 'intimacy' between storyteller and listener even when performance conditions militate against it, see Wilson (2006), 85.

[21] https://trojanwarpodcast.com and https://odysseythepodcast.com.

[22] This is rather different from, say, John Barton's 'epic' retelling of Homeric epic and Greek tragedy *Tantalus*, directed by Peter Hall, which premiered in 2000 in Denver, Colorado, and which was divided into three parts and ran from 10 a.m. to 10.30 p.m. (including intervals).

them. Combined with their often global circulation, this renders them one of the most accessible of modern art forms.

Some have traced durational performances back to the Greeks and to their festival culture—as was the inspiration behind the Denver production of John Barton's *Tantalus*.[23] For Lehmann, the most interesting point about the durational element of postdramatic theatre is the way it disrupts conventional temporality, protracting time to such an extent that the spectators are jolted out of their usual temporal rhythms and pushed instead into the new time zone of the play.[24] According to Lehmann and exponents of postdramatic theatre, the extra-temporality of durational performances separates them both from the mimetic drive of other modes of theatre and from narrative itself. But the length of podcasts is not intended to create a distance from the mimetic: rather, the makers of narrative podcasts are driven by the story they are telling and luxuriate in their ability to tell it in detail and at length without testing the endurance of their audience members, who are welcome to press the pause button at any point. Taking their place alongside the box set, on which many audiences also 'binge', narrative podcasts are one of the contemporary moment's most durational art forms, in which narrative is at the heart.

For Wright, the podcast medium enables him to range more widely, narrating tales from the wider mythic landscape that are not included in the Homeric epics. He thus positions himself not so much as a recounter of epic, but as a bard who can pick and choose from a wide repository of mythical tales, combining and ordering them in new ways. He embeds the tales in a twenty-first-century context, not just in his colloquial language but also at moments such as when Thetis suggests potential names to Peleus for the newborn Achilles: 'Frodo?' (Baggins), 'Harry?' (Potter), 'Percy?' (Jackson), 'Luke?' (Skywalker), or 'Arthur?' (of the Knights of the Round Table), she proffers.[25] This kind of light humour is one of Wright's tools to connect with his audience and set these stories onto a more familiar plane. He makes full use of the episodic, serialized form of the podcast to retell the mythic background that ancient audiences would have known—knowledge that can't be assumed now. This allows a

[23] See, for example, Coveney (2017). [24] Lehmann (2006), 156.
[25] *The Trojan War: The Podcast*, Episode 3: 19.10–20:30.

durational aspect without excluding audiences: Wright is, as he says, telling the tale of the Trojan War in 'serialized' form, even pointing out to his listeners the best moments for both him and them to take a break before returning for the next episode.

Yet, unlike live storytelling, it is the audience rather than the storyteller who ultimately makes the decision as to when to start or stop listening. In this sense, the recording technology of the podcast gives the listener an even greater role in the making of the narrative experience, much as postdramatic theatre aims to do and as video games can do as well. Live storytelling often takes place in a 'porous space',[26] where sounds drift in from outside, real-world events intrude, or—especially in promenade storytelling—the physical landscape has an impact. When listening to a podcast, the space is likewise 'porous'; but the surrounding context is now directed (even if unwittingly) by the listener, whose experience of the narrative is affected by the place and context in which they choose to listen.

With more knowledge than the audience, the storyteller remains in control of the narrative at all times. A conduit between audience and narrative, the storyteller is a kind of translator, making the unfamiliar world of the tales comprehensible; Wright himself offers extra-narrative commentary at the end of each episode, explaining, for example, how to spot various mythical figures in art or discussing the debates embodied in the Homeric Question. This is not the case with the other major form of narrative podcasting that has gained popularity in recent years: the non-fiction podcast, which – by contrast - knowingly fosters an equality between narrator and audience. The most successful non-fiction podcast since the genre's inception is *Serial*, a true-crime podcast that first aired in 2014, investigating the murder of a teenage girl, Hae Min Lee, in Baltimore in 1999. *Serial*'s narrator and producer, Sarah Koenig, fosters an intimacy between herself and the audience, just as a storyteller would; but unlike the storyteller, she affects not to have any greater authority in this tale-telling than the listener; we are encouraged to investigate with her, to learn as and when she does. Listeners became so involved in the first season of *Serial* that they went on to investigate the murder case

[26] Harvey (n.d.), 4.

independently. The episodic airing of *Serial* facilitated this independent sleuthing because it enabled Koenig to react to her listeners from one week to the next, prompting a new kind of audience participation that would otherwise have been impossible in the non-live, podcast format.

The podcast's length and structure drew comparisons with epic,[27] which were no doubt prompted by its oral–aural medium. But *Serial* is investigative journalism, albeit packaged into a popular, consumable format; it is not myth-making. Such podcasts, as with other true-crime formats, veer uncomfortably close to voyeurism—an accusation that was levelled firmly at the makers' next venture, *S-Town* (2017). Although the form and content of the podcast *per se* are to a large extent predicated upon the 'now', *S-Town* deploys some specifically epic tropes,[28] which afford some distance from the present moment. This distance, in turn, affords the listener a tighter focus on that very 'now'.

If the value of storytelling lies in the truths told and in the worlds revealed, podcasts like *S-Town* offer a new way of merging myth and history. Highly crafted and personally rendered, yet rooted in journalistic reporting, they occupy a liminal space between fact and fiction. The narrative mode defines them, but so too does the reflection they afford on the world beyond the podcast, suggesting that their makers are emerging as new epic storytellers for the twenty-first century, sharing stories, shaping perceptions in tales that serve as the repositories of contemporary cultures.

Soundscapes

This narrative turn in the theatre is a remarkable development. It encompasses a wide range of artists and theatre practitioners: from the twice Mercury Award nominee, Kate Tempest's poetico-musical-rap take on Homer, *Brand New Ancients* (2012), the North London rap artist, Akala's BBC 4's documentary-journeying-performing *Odyssey* (2018) to the solo reworking of the *Iliad* Book 1 by William Zappa, who bard-like brings Homer's ancient warriors to new audiences with energy

[27] Stanley (2017), 82 and Waldman (2017).

[28] See further, Chapter 3, 56–8.

and verve, and the numerous public readings of Homer organized around the world in recent years.[29]

In many ways the turning point in the UK came in 2005 with a production of Christopher Logue's *War Music* at Battersea Arts Centre (BAC) in London, which was performed in total darkness. Audiences were stunned by the visual power of Logue's text and its own musicality in combination with the accompanying musical score by Dan Jones.[30] Although the company, Sound&Fury, was interested in how deprivation of one sense can enhance the others, this performance also reminded audiences of the genesis of Logue's *War Music*, originally commissioned for radio, and drew attention to the musicality of the poem signalled in its title.[31] Many artists who rework the Homeric texts credit the influence of Logue, not least the two very different kinds of performance poets, Alice Oswald and Kate Tempest.[32] And for Tempest, in particular, it was this powerful verbal scene-painting, performed to Dan Jones' searing score in a blacked-out box studio in her local community theatre, that proved formative. Tempest wrote, in homage to Logue, her own 'War Music (After Logue)' (2012); and this tribute to Sound&Fury's *War Music*, in particular, became, with some changes, 'Ballad of a Hero' in *Hold Your Own* (2014). Tempest's performance of this piece is especially powerful with the improvised musical accompaniment from the Tongue Fu Band (with Arthur Lea on keyboard, Riaan Vosloo on bass, and Patrick Davey on drums).[33]

If the ancient rhapsode originally performed with a lyre, in the modern world the inextricable links between epic and music have never been severed. From the tantalizing and elusive voice of the Sirens to Orpheus' enchanting singing, down to the rap artists who find Homer's improvisatory mode a source of vocal inspiration, epic has always been the

[29] For discussions of some of these performances, see Macintosh, McConnell, Harrison, and Kenward (2018).

[30] *War Music*, Sound&Fury/BAC, dir. Dan Jones, Mark Espiner and Tom Espiner. *War Music* was also staged by the National Theatre of Wales in 2015, directed by Mike Pearson and Mike Brookes.

[31] Power (2018).

[32] For the differences in these two poets' performance styles, see Harrop (2018) and Greenwood (2018).

[33] Available on YouTube in a film by Tongue Fu Flicks, a commission for TheSpace.org: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dH797RUNJIY. For further discussion of this performance, see Chapter 3.

domain of the haunting and alluring voice. In a 2018 English-language production of Monteverdi's *Il ritorno di Ulisse, The Return of Ulysses*, directed by John Fulljames and part of a new collaboration between the Royal Opera House and the Roundhouse in London, there were contemporary resonances that chimed with other contemporaneous engagements with epic on stage. Monteverdi's opera premiered in the 1639–40 season in Venice, in the first public opera house and was the last opera the composer wrote before his death. With its radical focus on the vitality of the servants of Odysseus' household (*Od.* 13–23), it enjoyed huge popularity in its first few seasons, and in many ways vindicated the humanist elevation of the *Odyssey* as paradigm for tragicomedy.[34] But it was not simply the opera's demotic content that made it speak to contemporary audiences in London in 2018. First, it seems that it was the potential for creativity in the opera's performance that lay behind the creative team's selection of this particular sung version of Homer. One of the reasons, according to the conductor Christian Curnyn, was that since the score doesn't specify which instrument plays what, 'we basically improvise every night. One of the exciting things about this piece is that it's never the same from one performance to the next.'[35] This meant that the voice could come centre stage at the Roundhouse: 'The instruments ebb and swirl with the text and as it's all improvised, there's an incredible sense of creativity'; and unlike in nineteenth-century opera where the singers 'ride the orchestra', here it is the singers who dictate and create the music in performance.[36]

For Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright, Suzan-Lori Parks, it is the acute catalyzing of all the senses that is key to all theatrical performance.[37] The kind of auditory effects that Parks is seeking, above all, are achieved through her own particular form of orthography. The dramatic script refuses to conform to 'standard' spelling and punctuation, where an altered version would otherwise be more effective;[38] and it also

[34] Pollard (2018). See further, Chapter 5 this volume for a puppet version of the opera by South Africa's Handspring Puppet Company.

[35] Programme note. [36] Programme note.

[37] Parks (1995), 15: 'A playwright should pack all five, all six—all 7 senses. The 6th helps you feel another's pulse at great distances; the 7th sense is the sense of humor.'

[38] Parks (2015), 11–12: 'Each word is configured to give the actor a clue to their physical life. Look at the difference between "the" and "thuh." The "uh" requires an actor to employ a different physical, emotional, vocal attack.'

creates spaces in which, Beckett- and Pinter-like,[39] the silences speak loudest. Most striking among this unique orthography in the text are what Parks terms 'spells'. On the written page, these appear as the characters' names with no dialogue following them; and in their most extended form, they can fill an entire scene, as in Parks' 1996 play, *Venus*, about Sara Baartman (who was taken from South Africa and forced to stand on display in London and Paris as 'the Hottentot Venus' in the early nineteenth century).[40] Parks explains 'spells' as 'a place where the figures experience their pure true simple state. While no "action" or "stage business" is necessary, directors should fill this moment as they best see fit.'[41] Such 'spells' both conform to Lehmann's idea of the postdramatic in that 'emptiness and absence are used emphatically',[42] and yet at the same time, in performance they are replete with rhythmical narrative and musicality, just as the silences in the plays of Beckett, Pinter, and Peter Handke are musical.[43]

The Broadway musical, *Hadestown*, began life as a song cycle before being released as a concept album in 2010. As a genre, the concept album has resonances with epic, as do numerous other twenty-first-century musical examples that draw on Greek and Roman epic, such as American folk singer Dar Williams' *In the Time of the Gods* (2012) or UK band, The Mechanisms' *Ulysses Dies at Dawn* (2013). The concept album is, in a sense, the performed version of a short-story cycle, which itself has affinities with epic poetry, its roots being traceable to epics such as Homer's *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and *One Thousand and One Nights*, as well as to collections such as the *Panchatantra*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*.[44] Distinctive of the short-story cycle is the way that it can be read in parts or as a whole, but in either case the reader's experience of each story will be affected by their reading of the other tales in the cycle.[45] This mutually illuminating but equally potentially discrete quality is also true of the music on concept albums.

[39] On Beckett's influence on Parks, see Roach (2001) and Jarcho (2017), 169.
[40] Parks (1997), 80. On Sara Baartman, see Alexander (1990) and Willis (2010).
[41] Parks (1995), 16.
[42] Lehmann (2006), 90.
[43] See further, Chapter 6 for a fuller discussion of Parks' reforging of epic material.
[44] Ingram (1971), 17.
[45] Ingram (1971), 13.

Long before the characters of *Hadestown* were embodied before a live audience, then, their voiced presence was palpable. By the time the musical came to the stage, its lyrics had a new-found political resonance; and as the production developed, its narrative arc was gradually clarified.[46] Mitchell may have been strikingly prescient in writing in 2006 a song entitled 'Why We Build the Wall', but she could scarcely have known that the very same language she used for her exploration of insularity and protectionism would very soon reverberate along the newswires as reports of Donald Trump's election pledge to build a wall between the United States and Mexico were relayed around the world (see Chapter 6, pp.130–131).

Why Now?

There are other ways, of course, that Homer speaks to contemporary audiences. In the so-called 'post-truth' Western world, in which 'objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief',[47] epic tales are 'telling' in important ways. 'Post-truth' was designated by the *OED* as 'word of the year' in 2016, when it rapidly gained currency in the wake of the UK Brexit campaign and the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Emily Wilson's 'complicated' Odysseus (her preferred translation of Homer's polyvalent epithet, '*polytropos*' (much-turning) in her 2017 rendering of the *Odyssey*) is very much a symptom of this 'post-truth' world. Of course, there is nothing intrinsically 'new' about 'post-truth': if Odysseus is antiquity's paradigmatic spin doctor, both in the *Odyssey* and considerably more so in his subsequent reception history,[48] all late fifth-century BCE tragedies reflect in varying ways on a post-truth Athens, with its ailing democracy in the midst of an overlong war, during which 'appeals to emotion and personal belief' are often proven to be the most effective means of communication in the political arena.

[46] Green (2019). *Hadestown* was staged first at the New York Theatre Workshop (2016), before moving to the Citadel Theatre in Edmonton (2017) and the National Theatre in London (2018) prior to its Broadway opening in 2019.

[47] *OED*, sv. 'post-truth'.

[48] See Stanford (1963); Hall (2008a).

Since the 1990s and the rise of political 'spin doctors' and so-called 'economic' versions of the truth, there has been a concomitant yearning for 'authenticity'. This much-used word, with its culinary analogue 'artisanal',[49] is routinely applied to the raw emotions that are so plangently and simply articulated by Kate Tempest in her *Brand New Ancients* or in her retelling of Tiresias' life in *Hold Your Own* (2014). Despite claims that September 11th brought about a decisive shift in the cultural landscape, with 'ludic postmodernism'[50] being replaced by a moral-driven, narrative-based performance,[51] claims for such a decisive shift are both too neat and too US-centric. While political rhetoric does seem to have changed, 'increasingly enlist[ing] radical religious and moral arguments in its cause',[52] the shifts in the performance landscape, while often reacting to the alterations in political discourse, are rooted further back: alongside 'ludic postmodernism' has always sat a deeply political 'resistance postmodernism'.[53] A recent re-performance of the *Iliad* at Edinburgh's Lyceum in 2016, written by Chris Hannan, prompted director Mark Thomson to remark that the epic turn was a reflection of 'discontent with our thinking now'. Unlike the *faux* emotions implicit in 'virtue signalling', ancient epic is seen to tackle the big emotions head on. As Hannan added, the *Iliad* speaks to contemporary concerns about how to live with anger.[54]

For playwright and theorist Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, Greek epic modes of storytelling infiltrate the present moment in another way: he considers contemporary theatre to be 'rhapsodic',[55] seeing it as related to 'the epic domain of the Homeric songs and narration and at the same time to

[49] Thomas (2015). [50] Ebert (1991).

[51] Breger (2012), 47 discusses this claim but ultimately finds it too clear-cut, arguing that the shift takes place between the 1990s and the 2000s, but is not primarily a response to the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. On the reception of classical antiquity in the wake of September 11th, see Jenkins (2015), 102–57.

[52] McBride (2008), 86. [53] Ebert (1991), esp. 887–8.

[54] Hannan, interview in *The Guardian*, 26 April 2016; http://www.chrishannan.co.uk/index.php/adaptations/the-iliad.

[55] Sarrazac (1981), 38: 'À s'interroger sur l'avènement d'un *théâtre rhapsodique*, c'est-à-dire cousu de moments dramatiques et de morceaux narratifs, on en vient à se demander si notre tradition théâtrale ne recèle pas depuis longtemps une part réfractaire à la forme dramatique, une part *épique*' ('To examine the advent of *rhapsodic theatre*, that is, theatre sewn together from dramatic moments and narrative pieces, one comes to ask oneself if our traditional theatre has not harboured a stubborn element for a long time, part dramatic form, part epic')—our translation.

writing devices such as assembly, hybridization, patchwork, chorality'.[56] Narrative remains, but it is fragmented and reassembled into new forms, collage-like. 'Rhapsodic' theatre, then, is postmodern in its distrust of grand narratives, but it values the fragments from which those narratives were built ('the Homeric songs and narration').[57] It exhibits Jean-François Lyotard's postmodern 'incredulity towards metanarratives',[58] and seeks new forms that do not aim to make or legitimize meaning. Reflecting what he sees as the fragmentation of the modern world, Sarrazac's focus is less on the fractured nature of postmodernity than on the potentially endless re-combinations of material: assembly, hybridity, patchwork, and collage all denote new creation. For him, the ideal drama is, *contra* Aristotle,[59] not the well-ordered, in-proportion, animal; this so-called 'ideal' is, in fact, a chimera.[60] In 'rhapsodic' theatre, epic and lyric sit alongside the dramatic without one being prioritized over the other; the tension between these elements is both productive and desirable, leading to the constant renewal of the work which will be created afresh in different times and places, pulling the audience into the creative process.[61]

Ancient epic, as a performed genre—like all oral storytelling—is created in the interaction of bard and audience; and ancient epic performance serves as model for Sarrazac's rhapsodic theatre. For Sarrazac, 'the voice of orality, even at the moment where it exceeds dramatic writing' is at the heart of 'rhapsodic' theatre.[62] Created collaboratively between performer and audience, rhapsodic theatre like its improvised cousins, incorporates 'the now' by insisting on the creative impetus of the audience as well as the performer, seeing them as co-authors of the work.

[56] Sarrazac (2005), 183–4, translated and quoted in Pavis (2016), 194.

[57] Cf. Brecht (2015), 132 citing Alfred Döblin: 'the epic, as opposed to the dramatic, can, as it were, be cut with a scissors into single pieces that all remain viable'.

[58] Lyotard (1984), xxiv. [59] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1450b34–37.

[60] Sarrazac (1981), 18 describes the subject of his study as, 'Texte monstrueux, texte hybride, patchwork idéal des pièces écrites (et même non-écrites) durant ces dernières années, texte différentiel et utopique conçu non point comme un modèle mais comme une chimère, comme une créature éphémère destinée à nous faire rêver' ('The monstrous text, the hybrid text, the ideal patchwork of written plays (and even non-written plays) from recent years, a distinctive and utopian text, conceived not as a model but as a chimera, as an ephemeral creature destined to make us dream')—our translation.

[61] Sarrazac (1981); Sugiera (2004), 24.

[62] Sarrazac (1998), 202, quoted and translated in Turner and Behrndt (2016), 195.

The combination of forms and genres that is key to Sarrazac's rhapsodic theatre finds its parallel in the syncretization of myths from diverse times and places in a number of recent works, in which both form and content combine to create new collages. The production of Derek Walcott's *Omeros* at the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse at Shakespeare's Globe in London was one example of this.[63] Yoking the ancient Greek and Caribbean myths that Walcott penned in his poem, Bill Buckhurst's adaptation reflected this syncretization in its form by combining oral storytelling with theatre, and having just two actors take on the roles of all the characters.[64] Inua Ellams' *Half God of Rainfall* (2019)—like Walcott's piece, written and published as a long, narrative poem—adopted a similar performance style with the two actors alternately embodying and narrating characters when performed at Birmingham Rep and London's Kiln Theatre in April–May 2019. Ellams' work, hailed as 'somewhere between Homeric epic, magical realist myth and study in comparative culture',[65] tells the tale of Demi (the 'half-god' of the title), a child born of the rape by Zeus of Modupe, priestess of the Nigerian goddess, Osún. The poem flags its own syncretic nature in its division into acts: within each Act there are not 'Scenes' but 'Books', underlining the work's liminal status between print and performance, and recalling the imposed segmentation of classical epic into 'books'.

As Abd'Elkader Farrah's observations made clear at the start of this chapter, theatrical storytelling crosses borders. Epic, so long associated with national identity, now reflects in these multiple performance modes the modern era of transnational movement and influence, and has the potential, in Stuart Hall's terms, to 'impos[e] an imaginary coherence on the experience of dispersal and fragmentation'.[66] Tales 'told' do not just reflect identity; they create it.[67] Performing epic, both now and in the past, need not be so much about 'retellings' of ancient tales as about creating narratives and identities for the present, adapting and recreating them afresh with each new performance.

[63] Walcott (1990) was adapted by Bill Buckhurst and performed by Jade Anouka and Joseph Marcell in 2014, and again in 2015, starring Joan Iyiola and Marcell.

[64] McConnell (2018), 411–13.

[65] Dickson (2019).

[66] Hall (1990), 224. Hall is writing of the fragmentation caused by forced diaspora, particularly in the context of the Caribbean and the African diaspora more widely, which will be seen to be key to a number of works considered in Chapter 6.

[67] Hall (1990).