

The Colosseum: Clumsy substructures of a fourteenth century palace clutter up the one-time naval basin.

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THE RESURRECTION OF A WORLD

GREEK TRAGEDIES AND ROMAN COMEDIES IN THE ANTIQUE THEATRES OF SYRACUSE AND OSTIA

By GUIDO CALZA

GREEK tragedy has been resurrected in its noblest form at Syracuse.

"The 'Oedipus Tyrannus' by Sophocles and the 'Bacchae' by Euripides, translated into Italian by Professor Romagnoli, have been performed in the fifth-century Greek Theatre by Italian actors before His Majesty the King of Italy."

This is the report of the event in brief. But it merits the honor of passing into history as an exhibition of artistic beauty. Our great poet, Gabriele d'Annunzio, has dreamed for many years of reviving the antique Theatre at Tusculum near Rome by giving classic dramas there. The Commune of Verona has used the vast Roman arena several times for lyrical performances; and the great actor Gustavo Salvini has given new life to the Roman Theatre at Fiesole. But the grander idea of allowing the tragedies of the two greatest Hellenic poets to be heard this year after twenty-five centuries has assumed the solemnity of a rite performed in the place most worthy of its celebration.

Because Syracuse, one of the most famous and most flourishing cities of ancient Italy, is in truth worthy of once more feeling the throb of Greek poetry and art.

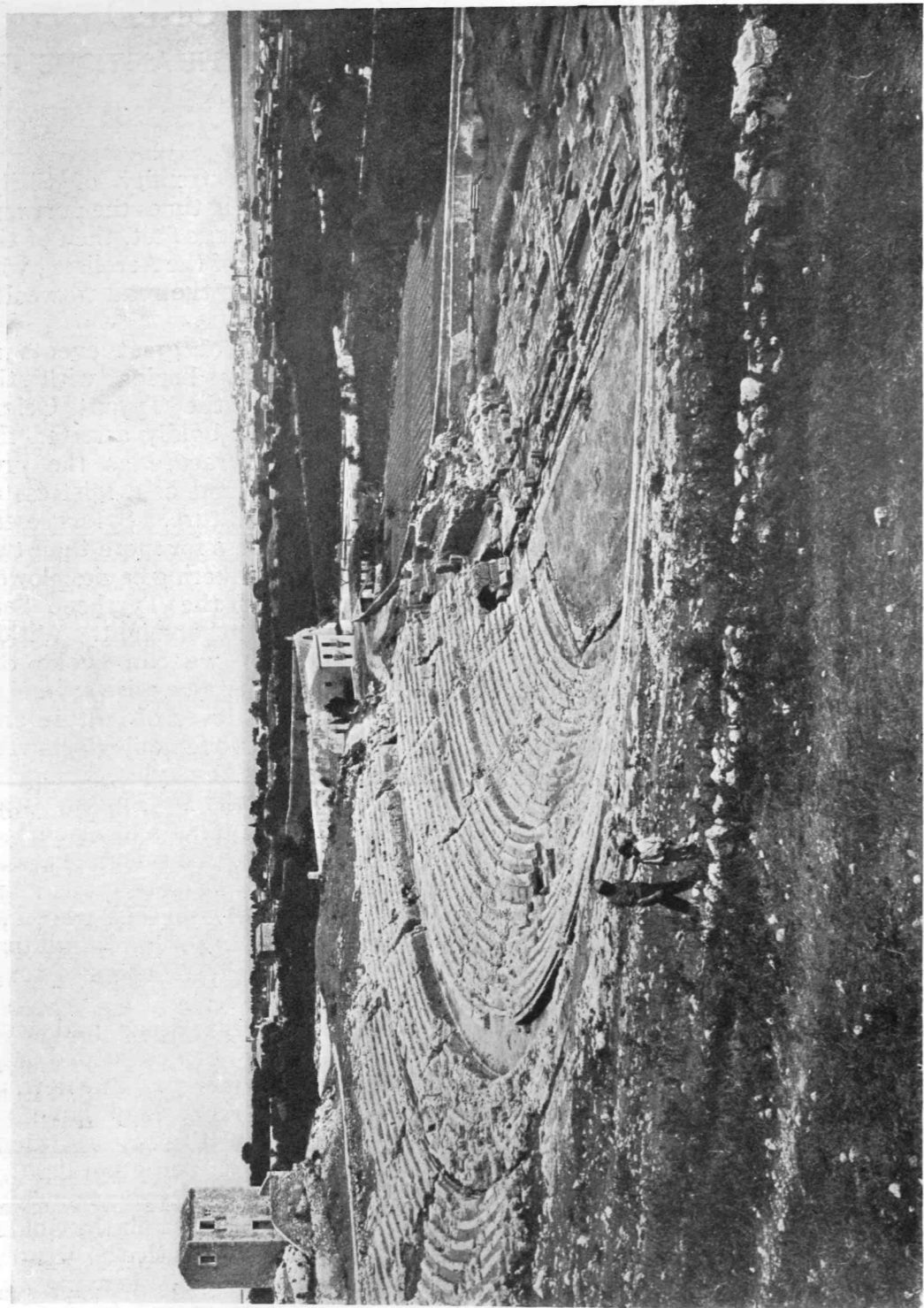
Puissant Syracuse, as the ancient poet Pindar called her. She reminds us of an endless line of heroes and kings and condottieri and legislators and philosophers and poets! This little bit of an island, rising like an immense dike to protect a crescent-shaped bay

on the eastern extremity of Sicily, became in very early times the port and market of the Sicilians first, then of the Phoenicians, then of the Aetolians, who showed the Greeks the road to wealth and glory.

But the series of great events in Syracusan history begins with the solemn figure of the Tyrant Gelon, who in 480 B. C. boldly asserted the importance of Syracuse as the protectress of Sicily and as a mistress of civilization and culture. Syracuse enjoyed real greatness for more than two centuries: her conquering navies plowed the Adriatic and the Tyrrhene Sea; Carthage yielded to her might. Within her strong walls, we can evoke the figure of King Hieron, a wise sovereign and a passionate lover of culture and art; and we can evoke noble poets who lived here: such as Aeschylus, Simonides of Ceos, Bacchylides, Pindar, Epicharmus, and captains and leaders of the people, such as Hermocrates, who triumphed over the Athenians, and an iron dictator Dionysius, who, like Napoleon, rose from the lowest military ranks to the brightest honors of sovereignty and empire.

With these great deeds and with these celebrated names ended the glorious life of Syracuse. But now, at last, Art and Archaeology have reopened the pages of this history, which are illuminated by a perpetual light.

The little island Ortygia, on which lies modern Syracuse, recalls the Golden Age of King Hieron with the temples of Apollo and Athena. Leaving this island, which was sacred to Artemis



Syracuse: The Greek Theatre—view of modern Syracuse in the distance.

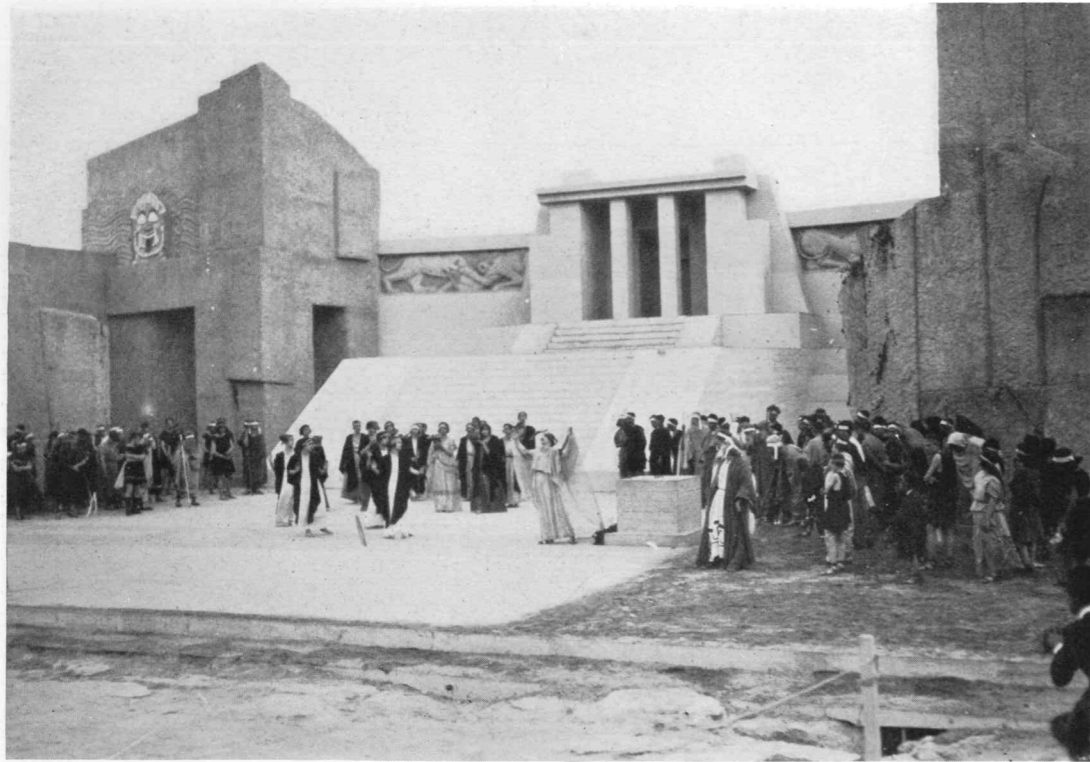


Stage-setting of scene in the "Oedipus Tyrannus" of Sophocles in the Greek Theatre at Syracuse.

and Arethusa and which witnessed the fierce struggles of the Athenian war, one finds places celebrated in history: the royal palace of Dionysius, the *agora* with its splendid arcades and its solemn temples; and in the silent fields furrowed by the silvery thread of the mythological river Anopus, one seems to hear the sweet song of the shepherd in the idyls of the Greek poet Theocritus; and, on the hill that dominates the azure Ionian Sea, are the walls of Dionysius, crowned by the strong castle Euryalus, the earliest example of military architecture and displaying knowledge of strategy in both conception and execution.

In this glorious city, the most living monument of her glory is the theatre. The historian Diodorus proclaimed it one of the most beautiful in the Greek

world; and in spite of ruin wrought by time and man, it still exercises an irresistible fascination with the noble historical memories that animate it, and the beauty of the panorama that surrounds it. The construction of this magnificent theatre may be attributed to the architect Myrilla under Hieron (478 B. C.), the patron of Aeschylus. It is situated in the *Neapolis*, one of the five districts of the ancient city and has a diameter of 150 meters; and the *cavea*, cut entirely out of living rock, is divided into nine sectors of seven tiers with forty-six concentric rows of seats. A wide aisle in the center served to facilitate the entrance of the spectators. The names of very illustrious personages still remain on some of the seats: those of Hieron and the queens Philistides and Nereides,



Another scene from the "Oedipus Tyrannus."

and of the priests of Jove and Hercules, who heard the most beautiful Greek tragedies here. And now thousands of people from every part of the world have been united here today by this celebration of art and culture. If the historian recalls that the first comedies of the poet Epicharmus must have been heard here, and that Aeschylus was present here at the performance of his tragedies "The Persians" and "Aetnaean Women," written especially for Gelon the Tyrant of Syracuse, the poet is intoxicated with the enchanting view enjoyed from this theatre. Above is the hill Temenite, that witnessed the battles between the Athenians and Syracusans, all covered with orange trees whose flowers "the zagara" shed their perfume on every hand, and on the east, the little island Ortygia, surrounded by the azure Ionian Sea;

to the south the valley of the Anopus with the temple of Olympic Jove, and the Ciane all overgrown with papyri; while the horizon is closed by the Hybla Mountains, famous in antiquity for the exquisite honey they produced. To bring Greek tragedy back to life, what setting could be better than this antique theatre? What grander and more suggestive scenery than the natural beauty by which it is surrounded? The stories of the tragedies seem to have found eternal life here amid the perfect lines of Nature, and in the resplendent atmosphere of memories.

On hearing the two great tragic poets of Greece wildly applauded, I thought that there must be something essential and fundamental in the taste of the public, which never alters, either with the changing of custom or with the passing of time. I thought



Scene from the "Bacchae" of Euripides in the Greek Theatre at Syracuse.

that there must be absolute beauty in works of art which all people have always admired and will continue to admire, even though the psychology of the spectators be radically changed. We of today no longer believe in the fable of the gods, in which the ancients believed; yet there is something besides the puissance of the gods and the dark workings of fate in Sophocles' terrible tragedy of "Oedipus Tyrannus"; Oedipus the King, a Michelangelesque figure sculptured with true knowledge of art, has been able to solve the fearful riddle proposed by the Sphinx, concerning the destiny of mankind. Yet he continues to ignore his own most fearful fate until the moment when misfortune falls upon him. Oedipus then, who knows much about mankind but does not know himself, represents

all humanity and all the philosophy of all times, ancient and modern.

The "Bacchae" by Euripides, the second tragedy played here, not only presents a religious myth, but it is also the glorification of the joy of living. The chorus, which in antique tragedy represents the voice of the people and of humanity, says in fact: "I esteem him blessed who lives happy each fleeting day" and adds: "it is not wisdom to be too wise and turn one's thoughts beyond human ken."

These spectacles were prepared with scrupulous care in every detail; the Italian translation is so beautiful and so perfect, that Sophocles and Euripides—had they written for us—could not have done better. The costumes were designed by an artist, Cambelotti, after models made from antique



The recently excavated Theatre at Ostia, where the "Aulularia" of Plautus was performed by school children.

paintings; and the scenery, showing the royal palace in ancient Thebes, surrounded by enormous walls, was constructed according to data furnished by learned archaeologists. When in the "Bacchae" the maidens of Thebes, robed in ample garments and crowned with ivy, danced before the altar of Dirce, to a musical accompaniment full of antique grace and antique mystery, and when the tall figure of Dionysus appeared on the city walls just as the last rays of the sun illumined the blond head and the scarlet robe of the actor, the crowds filling the ancient tiers of seats were seized by an irresistible fascination.

OSTIA

So we, who heard these tragedies, not only relived the Greek poem and

the Greek scene, but felt—even in the people themselves—the resurrection of a world that disappeared twenty-five centuries ago. And we experienced no less emotion at Ostia, the dead city of Latium, the commercial emporium of the Roman Empire, which has returned to the light after twenty centuries of death. Because an antique, but not antiquated, classic comedy "Aulularia" by Plautus, has been played in the antique theatre at Ostia. They were actors who played at Syracuse; here at Ostia, instead, boys from eight to ten years old, pupils in the common schools of the Campagna, dressed in Roman costumes, have acted a comedy that was certainly given in ancient Ostia before the senators and cavaliers, the business men and sailors of the Latin world, who had their stock-



Syracuse: The actor Annibale Ninchi as King Oedipus.

exchange and central offices at Ostia. The immortal rôle of the miser jealously guarding his pot of gold was played by a little boy ten years old; and the prologue was recited in Latin by the son of a poor shepherd, who had never seen a theatre.

A marvelous people! who have suc-



Ostia: The little actors coming from the temple.

ceeded in resurrecting the Greek drama at Syracuse with the immortal tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides; and who have made the public in the Roman Theatre at Ostia applaud the fresh, vivacious, sparkling comedy of the great Plautus.

Rome, Italy.