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## Live from New York: Hip Hop Aeschylus and Operatic Aristophanes:

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Two notable productions of Greek drama appeared in New York in the early months of 2006.<sup>1</sup> Downtown at New York Theatre Workshop on East Fourth Street, Will Power staged *The Seven*, his hip-hop version of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*; and on the Upper West Side, audiences at Lincoln Center came to see Mark Adamo's new work, *Lysistrata*, at City Opera. Both Will Power and Mark Adamo are viewed as rising stars in their respective fields, and both chose to follow up successful productions by adapting Greek plays. What seemed so innovative, and ultimately refreshing, was that these artists knowingly decided to reject most contemporary aesthetic notions of Greek drama and approach the ancient material from completely different angles. The end result was two shows that managed to present ancient drama with verve, clarity, and passion—and even to reveal a few striking new insights.

Mark Adamo's first opera, *Little Women*, had been an unqualified success at City Opera, going on to have another fifty-five international productions. In his new opera, which he described as a tragicomedy, Adamo wanted to flesh out the role of Lysistrata as a fully three-dimensional character. Initially she acts out of purely selfish intentions, but soon comes to realize that she has a wider responsibility. His Lysia "becomes" Lysistrata in the course of the piece as she develops a response to the war. (There's a scene in Act Two, when the Greek women crown Lysia and invest her with her new name, that has the guts to be affecting in an otherwise rollicking comedy. The names of the dead are embroidered on long white strands of fabric and attached to Lysia's crown by the women who have placed all their hopes on her strategic sex-strike to bring an end to the war.) In setting out to create his *Lysistrata*, Adamo avoided the temptation to re-stage Aristophanes, yet in many ways his opera dares to be passionate and gets closer to the spirit of that ancient irascible rabble-rouser than either a more faithful or a more radical approach might have done.

For example, in the same week as my interview with Will Power, I received a phone call from a fact-checker at *New York Magazine*: a reader had written to complain about Peter G. Davis's review<sup>2</sup> of *Lysistrata*, making the point that it was not Mark Adamo's idea to have mock, oversized erect penises onstage, but Aristophanes'. The fact-checker was bemused.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Seven*. Text and composition by Will Power; direction and development, Jo Bonney; choreographer, Bill T. Jones. Presented by New York Theatre Workshop at 70 East Fourth Street, New York City; 18 January—12 March 2006.

*Lysistrata, or The Nude Goddess*. Music and libretto by Mark Adamo; conductor, George Manahan; direction, Michael Kahn. Presented by New York City Opera and Houston Grand Opera at The New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center, New York City; 21 March—5 April 2006.

“Can this really be true? Did Aristophanes do this in his production of *Lysistrata*? I just can’t quite believe it.” The letter-writer had insisted: “Not to indicate erections in a production of *Lysistrata* would be to surrender to a new Victorianism.”

In Mark Adamo’s *Lysistrata*, erections did indeed abound, as well as a healthy jolt of pure anarchic Aristophanic fun. Adamo’s music has a sweeping, complex sound, and he makes no bones about his approaching his craft with a theatrical sensibility. The score develops themes that interweave throughout the piece, creating some interesting dichotomies and tensions. The first act of this very short two-hour piece has a jaunty cheekiness enriched with an assortment of percussive effects that one might describe as “Sondheim on *Planet of the Apes*.” If the music is rich, complex, and sometimes wonderfully frustrating, the libretto cuts across the forest of notes with a simplicity and brashness that frequently takes you by surprise. At the start of Act One, Lysia (she has not yet “become” Lysistrata) is in the boudoir with her lover, the general of the Athenian army, Nico. After he acquits himself very quickly in bed, Nico leaps up and tries to leave:

**NICO** I have to go.  
**NICO** I have to train.  
You hear that drumming?

*She struggles with the blindfold as— briskly, amiably, as if that entire rhapsodic scene never happened—he puts himself together. Time to work!*

We’re planning a raid: Spartan terrain.  
Three more days, come midnight, we’ll  
Have found out their Achilles’ heel, and  
Wham! Bam! Thank you, ma’am!  
They’ll never see it coming.

**LYSIA** *outraged* NICO!

**NICO** *utterly without malice* I’m sorry, Lysia.  
The time just flies!

**LYSIA** I can’t *believe* you—

**NICO** But: “Victory is the only peace.”

**LYSIA** ... low, lecherous--

**NICO** So, on behalf of all of Greece,

**LYSIA** ... heartless, treacherous—

**NICO** I thank you for such sweet release—

**LYSIA** *screams.*

**NICO** *wistfully*

I hate goodbyes.  
Farewell, then: farewell, then;  
I'll write you—

*He's gone. LYSIA finally frees herself of the blindfold. She's alone, and beside herself.*

**LYSIA**

IS THIS YOUR SURPRISE?

*Lysistrata* opens with three Furies suspended in mid-air over the stage, invoking us Athenians to “attend.” A chorus of protesting women arrives, waving placards and calling for peace. Initially, Lysia shoos them away—they are disturbing her preparations for Nico. After his disappointingly hasty departure for the battlefield, she resolves to lead the women in a mission to take the Acropolis and declare a sex-strike to end the war. As in the Aristophanes play, the combine forces with the women of Sparta, who here have strange Nordic accents that work every gag a lisp can take. The men are locked out in more ways than one, and Act One closes with the armies of Athens and Sparta in high rage.

In Act Two, the opera shifts gears and Adamo starts to pull the listener in with more emotional melodies and a couple of quite gorgeous arias that shimmer with heartfelt truth. The Lysistrata crowning ritual mentioned earlier comes off as entirely poignant and moving, and led to thoughts of our contemporary war dead, their wives, husbands, and families. Had Mark Adamo tricked me? I thought I was getting an anachronistic, rip-roaring, giddy comic opera, but Act Two seemed to go in a completely new direction—not sentimentality, exactly, but certainly high emotion. Lysia actually cared about her collective responsibility and, as I listened, so did I. But there was another surprise, and this was what I respected most about Adamo’s opera, a twist worthy of Aristophanes himself. The women win, of course, and there’s a party with singing, drinking, and (hopefully) lots of sex, but the men start squabbling and fighting, war breaks out again, and suddenly we are back to square one. To cap it all, Adamo produced not one, but two gods on their respective machines, and as the statues of Ares and Aphrodite soar up into the New York State Theatre’s fly tower, their live-action operatic counterparts, (played by Christopher Jackson and Arianna Zuckerman) tell the world:

**ARES, APHRODITE**

For never will it end.  
Never will it cease.  
Time to time there may be peace—  
There never will be peace.  
Brother vie with brother,  
Woman, vie with man,  
So and on and ever,  
So since time began.

A fatalistic ending! Conflict is inevitable, and the news is delivered by the two gods who should know. I asked Mark Adamo about his choice of these two particular divinities in delivering this message. He felt that, as Aphrodite represented erotic love and Ares war, they would seem the most apt. We talked about that wonderful passage in the *Odyssey* when Hephaestus traps his cheating wife Aphrodite in bed with Ares and gathers the other gods to witness her infidelity (8.266-365.) The myth that Ares and Aphrodite were illicit

lovers delighted Adamo, but it makes perfect sense: Ares is no more a god of war than Athena is. Rather, he is a manifestation of violence. To fight a war, the Greeks knew you needed Eros; he would supply the necessary lust for territory, power, wealth, or sex. When Ares and Aphrodite got together, sparks really flew.

I asked Mark Adamo what initially attracted him to *Lysistrata*. He remembered the play as having “a wonderful, sexual, hedonistic quality,” and, after the repressive world of *Little Women*, I can imagine that *Lysistrata* would have been appealing. But on re-reading the play, he found the plot lacking in character development: it had energy galore but nothing else immediate that grabbed him. Next he flirted with the idea of adapting Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and even Angela Carter’s *Wise Children*, but he kept being drawn back to the sexual exuberance and energy of *Lysistrata*. Adamo’s way into the play was to write a new version based on the original premise and to take a plot-driven work and reinvent it as a character-driven one. Like Will Power in *Seven*, Adamo set out to radically change his original source; but he also went one step further and tried deliberately to refute it. Adamo maintains that his *Lysistrata* is a revision and in many ways a critique of Aristophanes, more than an adaptation, and yet I found that in working to get far away from Aristophanes he actually came very close to the spirit of his ancient counterpart. What Adamo rejected was the idea of *Lysistrata* as inviolable classic, either as the quintessential anti-war protest drama or as a naughty nibble of ancient Greece for otherwise disinterested undergraduates on a great works survey course.

My favorite stage direction in Mark Adamo’s libretto reads: “*Quasi madrigal, in falsetto*: if prop phalli are used, the Soldiers sing this ensemble as the voices of their *phalli*.” The theatrical licentiousness of ancient phallic theatre allowed the taboos to come tumbling down, and Aristophanes achieved this brilliantly until a Spartan garrison peered down from the Acropolis. Adamo’s modern phalli are more of a tease. There’s a great moment in Act Two during a beautiful and heartfelt aria sung by Nico (Chad Shelton) to his remembered Lysia (Emily Pulley;) in the background is the forlorn Kinesias (James Bobick) desperately missing his Myrrhine. As he turns to gaze longingly on the scene downstage in fine operatic fashion, his appendage looms into view. The ridiculousness of the situation works because it’s so underplayed, the bubble of the rapturous scene and the undulating music proverbially pricked by a touch of pure Aristophanes.

All in all, Adamo’s *Lysistrata* is an incredibly bold and very successful new comic opera. If the City Opera production strayed into toothless camp and the supertitles took some of the zing out of the librettos’ deft rhymes, then another production could just as easily go in a different direction and Adamo’s work would still hold up. He even resisted the obvious temptation to make their war about our war. Adamo finished the libretto just a week before 9/11 and never envisioned the work as an overt anti-war play. Yet, when I listen again to the crowning of *Lysistrata* in Act Two, I get drawn in to the sense of ritual that so evocatively articulates the pain of loss:

**ALL WOMEN**

Families, shattered in a flash,  
Husbands, never to return:  
Widows, now, who yesterday were wives:

*an echo of LYSIA’s tantrum music*

It feels like hearing mountains crash,

It feels like seeing heaven burn:  
Gods, what else can matter but their lives?  
All of our lives?

What both Will Power and Mark Adamo succeeded in doing to varying degrees was to shake off the debilitating shackles of over-reverence and intellectual deconstruction. Both artists produced works that primarily conveyed a story they felt passionate about telling. Will Power responded to the myth of a shattered family struggling against a tide of hopelessness and related it directly to his own cultural experience and the motifs of hip-hop: Mark Adamo returned Eros to *Lysistrata* and sought to understand the motivations behind sexual (in)action. Both shows gave me great hope for the future of Greek drama on our stages. It can work, brilliantly, if artists are not afraid to make it their own.

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<sup>i</sup> P. G. Davis, "No Peace, No Sex," Classical Music Review, *New York Magazine*, 10 April 2006.