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Mouri Mitsuya and Hosoi Atsuko, eds. 古代ギリシア 遙かな呼び声にひかれて——東京大学ギリシア悲劇研究会の活動 *To the Very Echo: Performances of Greek Tragedy by the Greek Tragedy Study Club (GTSC), University of Tokyo*. Ronsosha, 2019.

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As Fate Flows: Records of a Student Theatre Company in Tokyo in the 1950s and 60s

“Now, cease your lamentation and do not stir it up anymore; everything has thus been determined” (S. *OC* 1777-79, translated by the author). As the chorus of elders sing these lines, it marks the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* written by the old yet imaginative Sophocles. In a formularized but still lively manner, the old men of Colonus, where King Oedipus breathed his last, deliver their last message to the audience: do not lament, things are sorted out.

When Professor Masaaki Kubo, the founder of the Department of Classics at the University of Tokyo and the 24<sup>th</sup> President of the Japan Academy, recalls his days in the Greek Tragedy Study Club, of which memories and records this volume is dedicated to, it is *Oedipus at Colonus* that comes first to his mind. Not only is it the last work in Sophocles’ Theban series that premiered in 410 BCE,<sup>1</sup> three decades after *Antigone* and two after the *Oedipus the King*, but it is also the source of ‘a distant voice’ which has been, as Professor Kubo understands it, speaking to him even during the preparation of

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<sup>1</sup> According to Professor Kubo’s notes in this volume.

his talk which is presented in this volume. These lines occupy the central part of what he delivered in front of his old fellows. For him, those choral lines which signal the resolution of the play itself and, at the same time, of the fate surrounding the house of Oedipus are echoing as ‘a distant voice’; the lines also guide us through the marvelous achievements by a student theatre company that successfully brought almost a dozen of Greek tragic works on stage in the 1950s and 60s. The company was, and is, as their influence has never ceased to exist, called ‘Giri-ken.’<sup>2</sup>

On October 14, 2017, a one-day conference on ‘Giri-ken’ was held at Seijo University in Tokyo as a part of a series of events that celebrated the 100th anniversary of the university. This volume was published two years later to record the lectures and talks delivered on this occasion. One of the editors, Mitsuya Mouri, Professor Emeritus at Seijo University and an expert in theatre studies, notes in the preface that the student company’s activities and achievements have not been fully explored yet and that makes their status in the history of modern Japanese theatre still unclear even to scholars of theatre studies. In order to fill this gap, this book was published to record what they, as undergraduate and graduate students, succeeded to do on-stage and off; and even to make them more publicly known, this book appeared on stage.

It might be somewhat difficult to detect from its name, but the aim of Greek Tragedy Study Club was, in fact, to perform tragedy but not to just study it. The members believed that their attempts to bring ancient poetry on stage would itself enhance their understanding of the essence of Greek tragedy. On 2nd of June 1958, the following year of its foundation, they brought their first performance onto the stage of Hibiya Open-Air Concert Hall in Tokyo, which was chosen as an ideal venue for performing Greek dramas given their firm belief that tragedy was to take place somewhere in the open, not in a theatre under the roof. The success of their production of *Oedipus the King* enabled the student company to continue to perform a piece on an annual basis. By 1970, the year in which they ceased to exist, their repertoire had been expanded to 11 works: *Antigone* (1959), *Prometheus Bound* (1960), *Agammemnon* (1961), *Philoctetes* (1962), *Trojan Women* (1963), *Heracles* (1964), *Persians* (1965), *Bacchae* (1966), the Aeschylean *Suppliants* (1968), and *Seven Against Thebes* (1970). It is surprising that the students,

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<sup>2</sup> ‘Giri-ken’ is derived from the abbreviation of the company’s original name in Japanese ‘Girisia Higeki Kenkyuukai’; its literal translation, Greek Tragedy Study Club, is being used in the English title of the book and elsewhere, e.g., in Production Database of APGRD’s website (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/research-collections/performance-database/productions>). For further information on the company, see their official page (<https://www.greektragedystudyclub.com/en/>).

with very limited amount of professional help, produced almost one third of the entire corpus of Greek tragedy.

What, then, was the hardest toil for the company in performing Greek tragedy? When Yusuke Hosoi, Professor Emeritus at University of the Sacred Heart whose field is aesthetics, reminisces about their production process, he reiterates that the members focused on three points. Each of these -- namely, chorus, masks, and language -- was, according to him, the very elements that made Greek tragedy what it was, and thus, what gave them the severest headache. Here in this review, however, for the sake of my own research which deals with the musical culture of the ancient Greek world I shall attempt to observe the entire volume from a particular point of view: the chorus and its production through the history of Giri-ken.

Mr. Sadao Nakajima, who later became a cinema director with expertise in sex and violence, recalls his struggle as the 'chorus analyst' in the production of *Oedipus the King*. In his examination of the English and German translations of the Sophoclean piece and the challenge to create a Japanese script based on them, he found 'the choral parts were totally beyond his capacity', even though he had already determined to write a thesis on the chorus to get his undergraduate degree. Even after the completion of the script at the end of 1957, he continued to discuss how to direct the Theban chorus with his colleagues; it was in one of those occasions that their discussion caught the attention of Professor Kubo, who had just come back from the U.S. and was having a cup of tea with his newly-wed wife in a small coffee shop in front of the University of Tokyo. His participation in the company was thus arranged by fate.

Since then, the students' toil in bringing the chorus into the orchestra at Hibiya had been shared with Professor Kubo; even for this young graduate of Harvard and later the first professor of the Department of Classics at the University of Tokyo, the Greek chorus remained a mystery during entire his days in Giri-ken. That he 'had no clue what the role of the tragic chorus was, so had to let the production go on without grasping the least idea of its essence' vividly tells us the uniqueness of the ancient chorus; it is also a major headache to any modern company that has attempted to revive Greek theatre in our age.

Going back to behind the scenes of *Oedipus the King*; even when rehearsals started, Mr. Nakajima was still seeking a practicable solution to the choral performance on stage. A chorus group at Tokyo University agreed to play the Theban elders, but they had had

absolutely no previous experience in dancing, which is the very feature that separates the ancient Greek chorus from the modern counterpart. Moreover, only a month, i.e., around one tenth in length of the usual choral training for the City Dionysia, could be spared for the student chorus to prepare themselves in both singing and dancing. To serve as the ‘*choregos*’ who was supposed to give theatrical direction to the choreuts at that time, as Mr. Nakajima recounts, meant that there was no other way left for him than to rely on his own perceptions on the ancient chorus: “I was the only one who studied the chorus back then; but the thing was, nobody had seen the real chorus with their eyes. In short, the chorus was a dancing collective, whose commitment was to dance collectively.”

Let us turn our attention to the structure of this volume; preceded by lectures, talks, and a symposium by former members of the company, we can find very detailed records of each production. All of these lists of staff, casts, and contributors, indices of leaflets distributed to advertise their plays, and of the published journals which they, as a ‘study club’, imposed on themselves, and even financial statements help us to imagine their long path to the stage of Hibiya. In exploring these records, I shall stick to the chorus in ‘Giri-ken’ to show various methods they deployed for better production.

For *Antigone* (1959) and *Philoctetes* (1962) choral songs were recorded in advance so that the choreuts could concentrate on their dance and physical movements; especially in the latter all the lines of the actors were pre-recorded as well. While two separate choruses, one for singing and the other for dancing, stood simultaneously in the orchestra of *Prometheus Bound* (1960), *Persae* (1965), *Bacchae* (1966), and *Seven Against Thebes* (1970), the one and only chorus, just like the Greek original, performed with their voice and movements in *Oedipus the King* (1958), *Agamemnon* (1961), *Trojan Women* (1963), *Heracles* (1964), and *Suppliants* (1968).

For the first time in *Agamemnon* the members of Giri-ken themselves, but not some external chorus troupes that they had deployed in the previous three plays, put costumes and masks on to become the chorus. According to Professor Mouri, one of ‘the twelve Argive elders’, they decided to play the choreuts by themselves for a deeper understanding of the chorus from which the company had been suffering ever since their birth. Although the audience could hardly catch their voices coming from the underneath of thick latex-made masks and, as a result, the long choral ode at the beginning of the play was criticized for “being boring as hell”, this experimental method made a

breakthrough for the company. Most of the founding members consider this production in 1961 to be their best. They found, at this very moment, a key to the heart of Greek tragedy: to dance and sing as a chorus.

Things thus sorted out, Giri-ken reached the best possible answer they could on the production of chorus. If they were led to the solution by some supernatural irresistible force, as Professor Kubo considers the king Oedipus at Colonus to be, or rather, if they had any firm reasoning in playing the chorus by themselves and, first of all, in conceiving an idea of making a theatre company for Greek tragedy, we cannot tell clearly from this volume. Its English title, *To the Very Echo*, however, may give us a clue.

Macbeth, a Scottish king who assassinated his predecessor and usurped his throne, is losing his sanity by seeing an unidentified disease encroaching on his country and his wife, for which even his doctor is giving up finding a remedy. Ordering his doctor to keep working on it, he promises ‘I would applaud thee *to the very echo*, that should applaud again’<sup>3</sup> if he could purge the disease. As most of us know, this applause would never be realized as Macbeth is to be killed as a usurper and tyrant; by referring to ‘the very echo’, a natural but personified phenomenon on which he has no control, the king appears as a hopeless man trying to reverse his fate in vain.

What, then, ‘the very echo’ does mean to the existence of Giri-ken? The title of this book, *To the Very Echo*, was chosen by Professor Kubo himself as Atsuko Hosoi, Professor Emeritus at Seikei University and one of the editors of this volume, told me in an email. When he found the final song of the chorus in *Oedipus at Colonus* echoing in his mind, their words ‘everything has been determined’ started to convey a positive meaning to him; fate embraces Oedipus and everything that he has gone through. Fate, indeed, played an important role in the student theatre company as Professor Kubo’s encounter with Giri-ken itself was totally coincidental; their success in performing Greek tragedy, however, was nothing but something they built on a land where fate does not dominate. May everyone in later generations applaud their achievements to the very echo that should applaud again and again.

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<sup>3</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V. 3. 53-4, italicised by the author.



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