

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Glasgow
Unit of Assessment: 31 – Classics
Title of case study: Taking scholarship to the stage: enriching a contemporary performance of Greek drama
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

Ian Ruffell significantly contributed to the critically acclaimed production of Euripides' *Bacchae* by the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS), which toured London, New York and Scotland in 2008. Ruffell re-translated the work and acted as academic advisor on the script and production, helping to create an accessible, modern yet rigorously accurate interpretation, which moved away from traditional performances of Greek tragedy to draw out the humour, gender and self-reflexivity in *The Bacchae*. The production attracted audiences of 33,529 in the UK and 9,338 in the US, and Ruffell's work facilitated their engagement with and better understanding of the ancient Greek drama's relevance to modern life.

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)
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The contribution of Ian Ruffell (Lecturer in Classics, University of Glasgow, 2001-present) to the NTS's production of Euripides' *Bacchae* stemmed from over a decade of research into fifth-century Athenian drama, both comedy and tragedy. This provided the skills and experience of translation and exegesis on which Ruffell's new, literal translation of the *Bacchae* drew. This new text then underpinned playwright David Greig's adaptation and informed director John Tiffany's NTS production. More specifically Ruffell's research included a focus on the following themes, which informed his interaction with adapter, director and cast: a) self-conscious theatricality in the drama of the period, particularly comedy; b) assessment of the nature and function of humour in drama; c) construction and exploitation of gender in comedy and tragedy; and, d) comparison between the nature of comedy and tragedy.

The main strand of Ruffell's research at Glasgow has been his work into Greek comedy with a key output being his book *Politics and Anti-Realism in Athenian Old Comedy: the Art of the Impossible* (Oxford, 2011), supported by an award from the Arts & Humanities Research Council research leave scheme (2004/5). This work was directly pertinent to *The Bacchae* as it is in that play that Euripides most clearly adopts techniques from comedy. Ruffell's understanding of the text – specifically the comparison of comedy that he explores in respect of theatricality, nature and function of humour and gender representation is a feature of that research – and a main feature of both his book study and his essay, '*Audience and Emotion in the Reception of Greek Drama*'. Since joining the University of Glasgow, Ruffell has considered these questions more directly in relation to tragedy, which has culminated in his publication of *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound* (2012), as well as a series of papers on various aspects of Greek tragedy, which have thus far been delivered orally at conferences and workshops (St. Andrews 2007, Oxford 2008, Lampeter 2008).

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- Ruffell, I. A., *Aeschylus: Prometheus Bound* (London: Bristol Classical Press/Bloomsbury Academic, 2012). ISBN 9780715634769 [REF2]
- Ruffell, I. A., *Politics and Anti-Realism in Athenian Old Comedy: the Art of the Impossible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). ISBN 9780199587216 [REF2]

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- Ruffell, I. A., 'Humiliation? Violence, voyeurism and humour in Aristophanes', in S. Blundell, D. L. Cairns and N. S. Rabinowitz, eds, *Viewing and Viewers in Ancient Greece* (2013). (*Helios* special issue) [available from HEI]
- Ruffell, I. A., 'The grotesque comic body, between the real and unreal', in M. Bastin-Hammou and C. Orfanos, eds, *Carnaval, politique et comédie grecque. Trente ans de recherches, ISTA* (Besancon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, forthcoming 2014)
- Ruffell, I. A., 'Audience and emotion in the reception of Greek drama', in M. Revermann and P. Wilson, eds, *Performance, Iconography, Reception: Studies in Honour of Oliver Taplin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 37-58. ISBN 9780199232215 [REF2]

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The National Theatre of Scotland's (NTS) production of Euripides' *Bacchae* opened the 2007 Edinburgh International Festival, playing to 13,553 people. In 2008, the production transferred to London and to New York's Lincoln Centre, subsequently returning to Scotland with a touring production. The production was a critical and popular success for the NTS, selling out even before its first Edinburgh performance. The production had substantial national and international exposure, reaching audiences of 33,529 in the UK and 9,338 in New York, where it opened the Lincoln Centre Festival with a nine-day run at the Rose Theatre (2-11 July 2008).

Ruffell was commissioned by NTS to produce a literal translation from the Greek with commentary to allow the playwright, David Greig, to create a version that would be readily understood by modern audiences without departing radically from the meaning of the play. Existing translations tended towards a very formal style of English, whereas the producers wanted to create a modern version which would be accessible to a general audience, rather than an 'archaeological' relic of an ancient drama. Playwright David Greig commented:

I was very keen to understand what an Athenian audience might have been expected to experience when they watched this play. And Ian was so knowledgeable about all of that. It was as close as I could get to having Euripides available to me at the end of a phone.

Ruffell's research looks at the power of comedy in the play and the impact this would have had on ancient audiences, and his ongoing role as academic advisor on the script and at rehearsals enabled the scriptwriter to strip back the formality and bring the comedy into focus without losing the meaning of the lines. His aim was to keep the flavour of the play's word order and line structure, which can be difficult to acquire from an off-the-shelf translation.

The critical reception demonstrates both audience appreciation of the powerful humour of the script and the acting, and a sense as a critic that comedy, gender and self-reflexivity were utterly unexpected in a Greek play, with the *New York Times*, for instance, calling it "playfully irreverent". Many reviewers commented on a perceived imbalance between the comedic and the tragic, but Ruffell argued that this was due to their preconceptions of the play. As he explained in a 2010 interview with the Open University, the comedy, violence and the gender play were not modern additions, but were present in the original text, obscured by the serious, tragicomic production style of most performances. These same critics, however, overwhelmingly give positive reviews; it was described as "lively, funny and rich in invention, the production keeps you entertained almost to the end" by the *New York Times*.

For playwright David Greig, Ruffell's contribution was instrumental to being able to craft the play because:

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...the translation attended so plainly and in such detail to the meaning of the text that I felt as fully aware as I could be of the play's ambiguities, cultural contexts and ironies. Reading a section with [Ian Ruffell's] notes and references I felt as though I knew the play nearly as well as if I were reading the original Greek. I was very keen to understand what an Athenian audience might have been expected to experience when they watched this play.

The contribution of professional classicists in advising theatrical productions has been investigated in a number of studies (outwith the University of Glasgow) in the field of reception of ancient drama, in which the example of the NTS *Bacchae* has figured strongly. In *The Public Value of the Humanities*, Mary Beard cites Ruffell's work with *The Bacchae* as an example of academic-theatre collaboration and notes that it takes years to begin to thoroughly understand a Greek play due to their cultural density, "deeply embedded in the society, politics, myth and religion of the ancient Greeks", hence the need for an advisor. She goes on:

The National Theatre of Scotland's Bacchae similarly exploited new academic approaches to the play... the result challenged the old familiar play about madness and possession, to suggest a story of the collapse of identities, especially sexual ones – in an extraordinarily powerful, disconcertingly modern, as well as authentically ancient, production.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)
Evidencing impact on creative process:

- Statement from David Greig, National Theatre of Scotland (available from HEI)
- Hitting Your Ear - Programme notes by Andrew Burnet including interviews with David Greig and Ian Ruffell ([link](#))

Citing Bacchae as example of Classics input to theatre:

- H. P. Foley and L. Hardwick, in E. Hall & S. Harrop (eds.), *Theorising Performance* (Duckworth, 2010) (available from HEI)
- M. Beard, 'Live Classics', in J. Bate (ed.), *The Public Value of the Humanities* (Bloomsbury, 2011) and *The Edinburgh Companion to Scottish Drama* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011) (available from HEI)
- Harrison, Stephen, 'The Return of Classics', in Harrison (ed), *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English* (Oxford University Press, 2009). (available from HEI)
- [Interview with Dr Ian Ruffell](#) by Open University on influence of academia on classical drama (transcript available from HEI)

Reviews of new Bacchae based on Ruffell translation:

- [New York Times, 5 July 2008](#)
- [Variety, 5 July 2008](#)
- [New York Daily News, 7 July 2008](#)
- [Reuters Hollywood Reporter, 8 July 2008](#)
- [TheatreMania, 7 July 2008](#)