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"The First Performance of a Greek Play in the Island's History": Classical drama in Malta in the late 1940s

*Carmel Serracino**

The years following the Second World War witnessed a growth of enthusiasm for the classical world in the Maltese cultural and academic scenarios. "The classical spirit seems to have invaded the University", declared the *Times of Malta* (henceforth *Times*) in 1947.³⁶ Set up in the previous year, the Malta branch of the London-based "Virgil Society" had assumed a leading role in fomenting a new classical awareness. Most significantly, the Virgil Society branch in Malta undertook a very practical interest in the theatrical values and aesthetics of classical drama, a highly innovative experience for an island with a theatre tradition consisting mainly of Italian opera, vaudeville, and the village farce.³⁷ As a result, the Maltese stage enjoyed five classical plays between 1947 and 1950. Three of these representations were produced by the Virgil Society, and two by the British Institute (B. I.) Players. This paper will look at the five productions, basing its content on memoirs and contemporary newspaper reviews.³⁸

The Virgil Society in Malta

To a large extent, the Malta branch of the Virgil Society owed its existence to the enterprise and determination of two young brothers.

³⁶ *Times of Malta* 13.1.1947, 7.

³⁷ See M. Galea (1996).

³⁸ The memoirs are mainly the personal recollections of Frank and George Mifsud Montanaro, who kindly shared them with the author through encounters and letters between 2012 and 2015. They also provided documentary memorabilia pertinent to the Virgil Society's plays, for which the author is extremely grateful.

Born in Valletta in 1925 and 1927 respectively, Frank and George Mifsud Montanaro received their secondary education in the years immediately preceding and during the war. Saint Edward's College was a teaching institution established in 1929 on the same lines as an English public school. As boarder-students, the two young men had easy access to the masters of the College, who were often excellent scholars in their field. They especially came under the influence of the Rev. Gerald Seaston (precise dates unknown), the Latin master at the College who was later to hold the Chair of Greek at the Royal University of Malta. A Cambridge graduate and a man of broad interests, Father Seaston, as he was affectionately known in the island, inspired his students with a love of classical culture and literature and especially of the Latin poetry of Virgil, and also introduced them to Homer in English translation. Besides, he communicated a deep interest in social questions and in the Catholic social doctrine much debated in the post-war years. Father Seaston was succeeded as Latin master by Father Giacinto Frendo O.P., a Maltese Dominican Friar who belonged to the Roman Dominican Province and who was in Malta during the war years. Well-grounded in Classics and in Italian culture and language, Frendo continued to foster his College students' appreciation of the classical world. Another inspirational figure was Umberto Calosso, the Italian master, distinguished by his great humanity and erudition.

A strong influence at Saint Edward's was the poet and author Francis Berry (1915-2006) who taught English Literature between 1943 and 1946, and who later moved on to become a professor, first at Sheffield University and then at the University of London. Berry happened to be a close friend of William Francis Jackson Knight (1895-1964), Reader in Classical Literature at the University of Exeter since 1942.¹ Jackson Knight had already made a name for himself as an emerging Vergilian scholar through the publication of notable works such as *Vergil's Troy* (1932), *Cumean Gates* (1936) and *Accentual Symmetry in Vergil* (1939). His Vergilian eminence would be established with the appearance of *Roman*

¹ Berry is the author of the Epilogue at the end of Jackson Knight's biography which testifies to their strong friendship: see G. Wilson Knight (1975), 479-483.

Vergil (1944) and the translation of the *Aeneid* for Penguin Classics (1956).² Jackson Knight was also one of the moving spirits behind the foundation of the Virgil Society in 1943. The Society's overarching objective was "to bring together those men and women everywhere who are united in cherishing the central educational tradition of Western Europe. Among such persons the love of the poetry of Virgil is most likely to be found; and for such persons he is the fitting symbol of that tradition".³ The first president of the Society was the poet and literary critic, T.S. Eliot, who, in his famous "What is a Classic?" delivered to the Society as his Presidential Address in 1944, hailed Vergil as "the classic of all Europe", the poet who is "at the centre of the European civilization, in a position which no other poet can share or usurp".⁴

Influenced by the current Vergilian ardour emanating from England and by the inspiration they had received from Father Seaston and other scholars at the College, the Mifsud Montanaro brothers, by this time students at the Royal University of Malta, decided in 1946 to start a branch of the Virgil Society in Malta. Francis Berry was instrumental in putting them in touch with Jackson Knight, who was both supportive of and enthusiastic about the initiative. It was indeed one of the parent Society's objectives to have branches throughout England, but the Malta Branch was perhaps the first one outside the mother country.⁵ Later, Jackson Knight was to be recognized by the local founders as the real stimulus behind the Malta Branch: Jackson Knight "is largely responsible for the foundation of the Malta Branch of the Virgil Society. His encouragement and enthusiastic support of the project was indispensable".⁶ From the outset, the Society in Malta sprang headlong into activity, the diversity

² For a full bibliography see G. Wilson Knight (1975), 495-506.

³ Letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* 18.12.1943, signed by H. E. Butler, T. S. Eliot, J. W. Mackail and others.

⁴ Full text in T.S. Eliot (1957), 53-71.

⁵ See letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* 18.12.1943. George Mifsud Montanaro is under the impression that the branch in Malta was the first offshoot of the Virgil Society outside England. The branch in Malta was the subject of some antagonism among committee members of the Virgil's Society in London: see G. Wilson Knight (1975), 274.

⁶ *The classical journal* [...]3, 2 (editorial by Frank Mifsud Montanaro).

of which was conveniently classified under four categories: (1) the production of classical plays, (2) play-readings, (3) lectures, and (4) reading of papers.⁷ October, 1947, saw the publication of the first edition of *The Classical Journal*, subtitled as *Organ of the Virgil Society (Malta Branch)*. Six issues of the journal were to be published by December 1956.⁸ Contributing a short article entitled “The integration of Allecto” to the third edition, Jackson Knight upholds the periodical as the first publication of its kind issued by the Virgil Society:

Through my old friend, Mr. Francis Berry, I had the honour and pleasure of taking some part in the foundation of a Branch of the Virgil Society in Malta, G.C. The Branch sprang into strength and fame, and became a model of the world. Now, through two of its leaders, the able young scholars Mr Francis Mifsud and Mr George Mifsud, I am invited to have the further honour and pleasure of contributing to the first periodical publication to be started by the Virgil Society anywhere, *The Classical Journal*.⁹

Although it was based in the University of Malta, membership of the Society was open to the general public. This is evident from the composition of the Committee and the variety of the contributors to the Journal, one of whom was A. F. Dawson. The Latin master at St. Edward’s College in the years after the war, Dawson was an excellent classicist of seemingly unconventional views who became one of the pillars of the Society. His public lecture on “The Art of Virgil” delivered to the local Virgil Society in 1950 was so provocative that it apparently shocked at least two of the classical scholars present by what they must have considered “an onslaught on Virgil who has given his name to the Society”.¹⁰

⁷ *The classical journal* [...]1, 83.

⁸ All the issues are now available online <http://melitensiawth.com/The%20Classical%20Journal.html>.

⁹ W.F. Jackson Knight, W. F. [1948], 3-4.

¹⁰ *Times of Malta* 7.3.1950, 8. Dawson’s [1950] essay, 19-38, is presumably an edition of this public-lecture.

The Theatre Productions

Why the Virgil Society in Malta resorted so intensely to theatre as one of the means by which to accomplish its mission is not altogether clear. George Mifsud Montanaro's previous involvement in amateur theatrics both at St. Edward's College, which had a strong dramatic tradition,¹¹ as well as later with the *Compagnia Filodrammatica Goldoni*, might have had something to do with it.¹² Whatever the reason, the two brothers saw the Society as an excellent platform from which to test the effectiveness of classical drama on stage and bring it to an audience unfamiliar with its stark beauty and timeless appeal. One of the very first activities by the Society in Malta was the reading of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* held at the Royal University Union on 5 April, 1946, which must have tested the waters for the more ambitious endeavours to come.¹³ The Society was responsible for staging three full-scale plays in the space of eighteen months, a remarkable feat in the face of the financial and logistical constraints that must have naturally impeded the student group. The first production was Plautus' *Captivi* in February, 1947, which was followed, almost simultaneously, by the *Orestes* of Euripides in March of the same year. The following year, in May, witnessed the staging of the third play, the *Hippolytus* of Euripides. The success of the first two performances must have motivated the B. I. Players to put up Euripides' *Iphigenia in*

¹¹ According to George Mifsud Montanaro (correspondence dated 17 February, 2015), St. Edward's organized "an annual Shakespeare production, a great and exciting event! But not only Shakespeare. There were also Italian productions under the influence and inspiration of Umberto Calosso: freshly composed, satirical and gloriously funny, with a political (anti-Fascist) slant. Francis Berry invigorated the tradition, gave new significance to Shakespeare and revealed the beauty of the poetry and the splendour of the diction. He also encouraged original work, for example, one year organizing a dramatic competition, in which each School House was to present an original one-act play: I remember composing and playing out a one-act play on the subject of the first Anglo-Saxon Christian poet, Caedmon, who, as St. Bede relates, miraculously received the divine gift of poetry and sang the creation of the heavens and of the "middle-earth".

¹² On this Italo-Maltese theatre company which staged plays in the Italian language medium, see P. Xuereb (2011), 103-104. It is interesting to note that the "dramatization of Virgilian scenes" was also among Jackson Knight's plans for the parent Virgil Society, about which see G. Wilson Knight (1975), 278.

¹³ *The classical journal* [...] 1, 84.

Aulis in March and April of 1948 and, two years later, the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus. All these productions involved a mixture of British and Maltese cast and crew.

The Captivi

A three-act version of the *Captivi* was performed in English on 4 February, 1947, at the newly-built Radio City Opera House in Ħamrun under the direction of Giovanni Mangion and Wallace P. Gulia. The event was felt to be something of a novelty, warranting the distinguished patronage of the British Governor and the Archbishop of Malta. Featuring a photograph of the full cast and crew at the dress rehearsal, the *Times of Malta* described the representation as “a new experience on the Maltese stage. It is not often that one sees a dramatic reproduction of customs and social behavior which prevailed more than two thousand years ago”.¹⁴ The *Times* reviewed the play, and so did *Leĥen is-Sewwa*, the then twice-weekly newspaper of the Church.¹⁵ It was a rare occasion for this paper to review theatre in English; but this particular production boasted among its credits a name likely to attract the newspaper’s attention. This was Can. Eduard Coleiro, the Professor of Latin at the Royal University of Malta and a rising personality in the Church’s hierarchy. Coleiro, who was at the time serving as President of the Virgil Society, is acknowledged as ‘the soul of the whole thing’ by *Leĥen is-Sewwa*’s correspondent. This reviewer also alludes to the Society’s boldness in the choice of play to provide the Maltese audience with its ‘first taste of classical dramatic art’ (*I-ewwel togħma tal-arti drammatika klassika*).

Performing to a full house, the play started with the audience still taking their seats which all but marred the effect of the introductory prologue delivered by George Mifsud Montanaro. The audience soon warmed up to the action and responded encouragingly, making it evident that theatre-goers in Malta were curious about classical theatre. An unidentified but certainly erudite reviewer for the *Times of Malta*, after quoting Gellius in

¹⁴ *Times of Malta* 4.2.1947, 7 (photograph) and 9 (article). An uncropped version of the cast and crew photograph was also published in *The classical journal* [...] 1 (plates, unpaginated) together with another picture showing a scene from the play.

¹⁵ *Leĥen is-Sewwa* 12.2.1947, 6; *Times of Malta* 17.2.1947, 6.

Latin on a biographical point about Plautus, perceptively drew similarities between the comedy's subject matter and that of Maltese playwright and producer Mikielang Borg (1868-1939) who, a generation or so earlier, had adopted and translated French *Pochades* for the Maltese stage to great popular acclaim.¹⁶ This is clearly one reason, apart from Plautus's basic humanity, why the comedy managed to overcome the temporal gap of two millennia and still "provoke sympathy and laughter from a Maltese Catholic generation of the 20th century". In an attempt to make the text more accesible, the producers omitted many topical lines about Roman low society uttered by the parasite Ergasilus, whose portrayal by Robert A. Staines was judged 'magnificent' by the *Lehen is-Sewwa* critic. The *Times* critic, however, after singling out the most noteworthy performances, observed a deficiency in the English intonation of some of the actors:

... the acting of the other students, though as good, was more or less marred by the jarring effect of broad un-English intonation. An imperfect diction is the besetting weakness of English drama in Malta. Maltese and English are so phonetically different that a sense of English tone and speech-rhythms can be attained only in special educational circumstances. Old Edwardians have an advantage over other students in this respect.

The *Orestes*

The resounding success of the *Captivi* spurred the Virgil Society to strike while the iron was hot by embarking straightaway on a new classical production. Euripides' *Orestes* was staged in English under the direction of Frank Mifsud Montanaro at the Manoel Theatre in Valletta on 20 March, 1947. Later, *The Classical Journal* described the *Orestes* as "the first performance of a Greek play in the island's history".¹⁷ This had been the general impression in anticipation of the performance, as a short promotional article penned by 'T. C. P.' appearing on the *Times* two days

¹⁶ On Mikielang Borg, see M. Galea (1996), 163-189.

¹⁷ *The classical journal* [...] 2, 2-3 (editorial by Frank Mifsud Montanaro). Later, the safer "probably the first Greek play ever presented on the island" is preferred in *The classical journal* [...] 4, 4 (editorial by George Mifsud Montanaro).

before the night makes clear.¹⁸ 'T. C. P.' were the initials of T. Cyril Parker, a teacher of English at the Lyceum who also reviewed theatre for the *Times* and was an occasional actor himself.¹⁹ Parker concluded his note by an interesting reference to the Manoel Theatre: "It is a long time since the Manoel Theatre has been used for the purpose for which it was built; no better home could be found for this exciting and beautiful poem". This suggests that the *Orestes* was one of the first high-calibre plays to be performed at the Manoel Theatre since the early 1920s and the long years in which the ornate 18th-century theatre served mainly as a cinema-hall.²⁰

A beautiful set of six outdoor photographs, involving actors and chorus in full costume and in stylistically choreographed postures, was taken for publicity purposes, or perhaps - seeing that none of these photographs seem to have appeared in the local press - simply as mementos of the important event.²¹ The performance was again patronized by the same distinguished personages that had honoured the *Captivi*. The *Times*, review by T. Cyril Parker, speaks of "two audiences, one juvenile and one adult" being held riveted through the proceedings in a way never witnessed during a film screening, indicative to the reviewer that we are already, in Tennyson's words, "half sick of shadows".²² However, Cyril Parker was not quite happy with the choice of play from the Greek tragic repertoire, giving two reasons for his complaint: firstly, there was not yet a first rate English acting version; secondly, "a good deal of the action takes place on the battlements necessitating the thrusting forward of the black cloth if the actors are to be seen from all parts of the auditorium thereby

¹⁸ *Times of Malta* 18.3.1947, 7. Just how active the Society was at the time can be seen from a small note appearing on the same page of this issue of the *Times* promoting a public lecture by Professor Joseph Aquilina on "The Classical Tradition" for that evening at the Library of the Royal University of Malta.

¹⁹ Ch. Arrigo (1999), 52.

²⁰ P. Xuereb (2011), 102-109.

²¹ The *Times of Malta* (29.3.1947, 8, and 30.3.1947, 13) featured two photographs from the production. Other photographs appeared in *The classical journal* [...] 1 (plates, unpaginated).

²² *Times of Malta* 25.3.1947, 9.

limiting the space available for the movements of the chorus". He reserved his best praise for the "amazingly well managed" Chorus of Argive Virgins, trained by Irene Cox, who also performed the part of Electra. Cox was an English actress and dancer, a former pupil of the Princess Poutiatine's School of Russian Ballet.²³ The Mifsud Montanaro brothers both had acting roles, but while George, as Orestes, was commended for making 'the sorriest lines seem like poetry', Frank, playing Menelaus, betrayed the difficulties he must have encountered in finding the right balance between his disparate jobs of director and actor. The drama was accompanied by live violin and by playback music from Sibelius and Grieg, which is suggestive of a highly romanticized approach to the sombre drama.²⁴

The *Iphigenia in Aulis*

Despite Cyril Parker's unbridled optimism about patrons' attention during the *Orestes*, it appears that the actual turnout for the performance's only night was a poor one.²⁵ However, the next Greek play appearing on the Maltese stage a year later "broke attendance records, playing to even larger audiences than had flocked to see modern plays".²⁶ This was Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* by the B.I. Players, a theatre group within the British Council, popularly known in those days as the British Institute. The group was established by (retired Major) Alec Cathcart Bruce who was Director of the B. I. between 1944 and 1950. An energetic organizer, Bruce was a theatre aficionado, keen on acting and theatre direction.²⁷ He performed both functions in the *Iphigenia*, playing the short role of

²³ *Times of Malta* 5.3.1948, 5.

²⁴ *Orestes*: programme-note. George Mifsud Montanaro recalls Sibelius' *The Swan of Tuonela* as one of the pieces.

²⁵ *Times of Malta* 13.8.1948, 3.

²⁶ *Times of Malta* 13.8.1948, 3.

²⁷ See J.C. Mompalao de Piro (1985), 46. The University of Oxford's online database "Archive of Performance of Greek and Roman Drama" (A.P.G.R.D.) only record of Alec Cathcart Bruce is as actor in a production of Euripides' *Bacchae* directed by Herman Roelvink in 1926 at Star-Camp, Ommen, Provincie Overijssel, Netherlands (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/production/8860>; accessed on 12.1.2015).

Menelaus besides directing the piece. The textual version chosen for this presentation was the English verse translation by Florence Melian Stawell, the Melbourne-born classical scholar whose translation was published in 1929 and immediately commended for its acting potential.²⁸ Bruce ended the play with Iphigenia's death, cutting off the final deliverance of the heroine by the goddess Artemis, which many scholars consider to be a later addition by the playwright's son to the original plot.²⁹

In his critique for the *Times*, T. Cyril Parker raved about the performance of Marguerite Mercieca in the role of Clytaemnestra, describing it as 'magnificently perfect as I have ever seen on the amateur stage'. He also lauded Diana Harris' "flawless performance" as Iphigenia. According to Cyril Parker, the Greek Chorus is generally the "greatest difficulty" in bringing Greek drama to the modern stage. As choreographed and led by Irene Cox, however, the Chorus here was "a thing of very moving beauty", making the reviewer exclaim that "not one position was seen that was not authentic and might not have its place on a Greek vase". On the other hand, he disapproved of the Chorus singing most of their lines in unison, which produced some degree of incomprehension. Such was the overall level of commitment of this production that all costumes were specially designed for it. Moreover, a small orchestra was brought together by Maestro Francesco Bellizzi to interpret melodies from Gluck's opera *Iphigénie en Aulide* on which a couple of choral odes in Stanwell's translation were based. The play was presented during the Drama Week at the Auberge d'Aragon in Valletta, at the time serving as premises for the B. I., and enjoyed a considerable run: five shows between 10 and 15 March, and three repeats between 15 and 17 April. A recording was even broadcast on the local relay service on 15 March.³⁰

The *Hippolytus*

As their third classical production, the Virgil Society opted for a summer open-air representation of Euripides' *Hippolytus* at the Villa Bonici in Sliema. The adultery theme was bound to raise some moral

²⁸ Review in *Greece and Rome* 1.1 (1931), 59.

²⁹ See, e.g., A. Lesky (1996), 396-397.

³⁰ *Times of Malta* 12.3.1948, 6. The recording may still survive at the Public Broadcasting Services among the great number of unarchived reels awaiting digitization.

anxiety from certain quarters. When rehearsals were underway, Frank Mifsud Montanaro, who was again in charge of the direction, received an unexpected telephone call from a Church official who expressed ecclesiastical concern about the play's subject matter. Mifsud Montanaro assured the monsignor that he was treating the illicit-love theme with utmost discretion and in an austere fashion. This perhaps explains why the programme-note accompanying the performance described the play as "a romantic tragedy of a very austere and religious kind". A promotional article in the *Times* stressed the wonderful reality that Greek tragedy should ever be attempted in a small island such as Malta, something "which much larger places would not even dream of essaying".³¹ The play ran for three nights between 27 and 29 August, 1948, and one gathers from its programme-note that many distinguished persons were expected to watch it, including the British Governor and the Maltese Prime Minister.

T. Cyril Parker started his review of the play as follows:

Last week's production of this, probably the first, tragedy of unrequited love, had two great advantages over the other two recent Euripides plays, *The Orestes* and *Iphigenia in Aulis*. First, in the magnificent poetry of Gilbert Murray who is almost as fine a poet as he is a Greek scholar; and, secondly, in the all-important matter of the chorus for, not only was every word heard distinctly, but practically throughout the verse was spoken beautifully. Had it not been for a maddening voice from the wings shouting the words half a beat before the chorus itself spoke, this part of the production would have been well-nigh perfect.³²

The character of Phaedra was played by Christine Williams who had some initial problems in delivering her lines "on an uncomfortable and unlovely Victorian sofa". Her later speeches "were filled with such tremulous sweetness as will be long remembered". Cyril Parker admired the beauty of elocution by George Mifsud Montanaro as Theseus and Joseph de Piro as Hippolytus – if anything, it was too beautiful to evoke

³¹ *Times of Malta* 13.8.1948, 3.

³² *Times of Malta* 1.9.1948, 3.

the required tragic pity. The costumes left something to be desired: in spite of his heavy make-up and hirsuteness, “the skimpiness” of Theseus’ attire betrayed the actor’s young age. A setback with the production was the romantic music by Wagner, Grieg and Sibelius, which the critic considers inappropriate to evoke the gravity of Greek drama; moreover, it was produced by “a particularly cacophonous loud-speaker”. Despite the shortcomings, the performance was, in the reviewer’s belief, “a thing of moving beauty”. He wound up his article by suggesting a work by Shakespeare, the “flowering of Western culture”, as the next theatrical undertaking by the Virgil Society. The *Hippolytus*, however, was to be their last production. The Mifsud Montanaro brothers were soon to move to Oxford as Rhodes scholars and, in their absence, the Virgil Society lost much of its vitality and gradually dissolved.³³

The Agamemnon

Before leaving Malta, George Mifsud Montanaro was asked to tread the boards in a classical production for one last time. This was the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus which Alec Cathcart Bruce, along with Helen Laybourne, directed for the B. I. Players and presented at the B. I. in March 1950. The version used was the verse translation by Professor Gilbert Murray. A publicity article in the *Times* written by Michael Kissaun, who had also been the stage-manager for the *Orestes* and who later become the first General Manager at the Manoel Theatre, was largely aimed to provide readers and potential viewers with an historical background to Greek tragedy and Aeschylus’ drama.³⁴ However, Kissaun ended his article with an interesting reference to Gilbert Murray, stating that the famous Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford had “taken a personal interest in the production and given valuable advice”. This is suggestive of some correspondence taking place between Bruce and Murray relative

³³ Frank Mifsud Montanaro left for Oxford in October, 1948, to be followed by his brother in the summer of 1950.

³⁴ *Times of Malta* 9.3.1950, 9. About Michael Kissaun, see J.C. Mompalao de Piro (1985), 49, and P. Xuereb (2001), 118.

to this production in Malta, which possibly still survives among Murray's extensive collection of papers housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.³⁵

There were six shows of the *Agamemnon* between 20 and 25 March with a vigorous box-advertisement on the *Times* both before and during the run.³⁶ The ecstatic assessment of T. Cyril Parker in his *Times* critique gives one the impression that the *Agamemnon*, or the "banquet of horror" as he calls it, was indeed the artistic culmination of the series of classical productions which had started with the Virgil Society's production of Plautus' *Captivi*.³⁷ Right from the start, Bruce managed to draw his audience into the harshly distant world of Aeschylus by presenting the Watchman, played by Bruce himself, "as if he were a relative, albeit a distant relative, of the Porter of Macbeth". The production was characterized by beauty, 'achieved mainly by simplicity and perfect proportion'. The acting was uniformly superb, headed by Victor Mercieca's matter-of-fact *Agamemnon* which contrasted strikingly with Angela O'Shea's Clytaemnestra who looked "every inch a queen and a barbaric queen at that". The two leads were given excellent support by Faith Flynn as Cassandra and Raphael Simpson as Aegisthus. No Greek production could reach the standards of the *Times'* theatre-critic unless the Chorus was excellent in speech and movement and, in so far as the former was concerned, the Chorus of Argive Elders in this production was "the star" of the whole performance. Whether spoken by George Mifsud Montanaro as its Leader, or by the rest of the members, sometimes in a body, sometimes individually, the Chorus was "clear and melodious" in every word uttered. Interestingly, Cyril Parker distinguishes the Herald's entrance through the audience as "one of the thrills of the performance": clearly such breaking of spatial conventions was still uncommon in

³⁵ The A.P.G.R.D. records B. I. Players' *Agamemnon*, citing as its source a black and white photograph among the Gilbert Murray Collection at the Bodleian Library, Oxford. (<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/production/7187>; accessed 12.1.2015). [The author has indeed discovered, among Murray's papers at the Bodleian Library, two letters by Cathcart Bruce concerning the production of the *Agememnon*. The discovery happened too close to the publication of these proceedings to allow any further reference to them other than this simple note. The author hopes to discuss the letters in a forthcoming work.]

³⁶ Adverts appeared on the *Times of Malta* of 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, 22, 24 and 25.3.1950.

³⁷ *Times of Malta* 22.3.1950, 9.

those days. The reviewer's final assessment of the play was that it was "beautiful, exciting and intelligible, three qualities which are not always to be found in modern representation of Greek drama".

Aftermath and Conclusion

At the end of *Agamemnon's* run, a party was held for the B. I. Players to celebrate the success of the production and also to pay tribute to Alec Cathcart Bruce and his co-producer Helen Laybourne who were both to leave Malta during the summer.³⁸ For the occasion, the two were presented with suitable tokens of appreciation by a fine member of the cast who was also soon bidding farewell to the island. In fact, George Mifsud Montanaro left Malta in the summer of 1950, returning only in 1998 after an internationally brilliant career that fused his evangelic calling and academic proclivities. Monsignor Archimandrite George Montanaro Mifsud now serves in the Greek Catholic Church of Our Lady of Damascus in Valletta.³⁹ No less fascinating, albeit different, was the career of his elder brother, Frank, which saw him first working in the Overseas Civil Service, then as legal consultant with the Government of Tanzania and, finally, with the Food and Agriculture Organization (F.A.O.); his last position with this organization was that of Chief, Legislation Services, concerned with the legal aspects of natural resources management and development. Dr Frank Mifsud Montanaro has lived in Rome since the late 1960s. The two brothers certainly exerted a lasting effect over their contemporaries: "It was rare to meet students of such intellectual capabilities" was the assessment of President Emeritus Professor Gwido De Marco.⁴⁰

Clearly, and in spite of an ephemeral existence, the Virgil Society in Malta contributed significantly to the propagation of Greek and Roman culture in post-war Malta and, still more notably, to the island's theatre history of classical performance. With the disbanding of the Society following the Mifsud Montanaro brothers' departure, classical drama

³⁸ *Times of Malta* 20.3.1950, 3.

³⁹ For a biography, see M.J. Schiavone ed. (2009), 2.1162-1163. Mgr Mifsud Montanaro is presently being helped by the Rev. Prof. Deacon Martin Zammit, author of a paper in this collection (editor's note).

⁴⁰ G. De Marco (2007), 36.

did not return to the Maltese stage before the late 1960s when the new generation of budding theatre directors started to rediscover its ageless appeal and relevance.

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The Chorus of Argive Virgins from the *Orestes*.



Irene Cox as Electra and George Mifsud Montanaro as Orestes.



Irene Cox, George Mifsud Montanaro, and Peter Laister (respectively, Electra, Orestes and Pylades), together with the Chorus of Argive Virgins.



The Chorus of Argive Virgins from the *Orestes*.



Frank and George Mifsud Montanaro in 2015.