

A Chorus of Disapproval: Conserving Classical Theatres

John Carr

■ Scylla and Charybdis clash still in the artistic and political arenas of the ancient Mediterranean theatre. But the battle lines are drawn not between the artists and politicians of Scylla; rather the artists' opponents are the Charybdis of conservation of those ancient places of performance built to the triumph of Greece and Rome – the theatres, stadia, odea, amphitheatres and arenas where classical civilisations declaimed and disported themselves.

These echoing ancient sites have become the scene of a deep political, philosophical and practical contest between impresarios, artistic directors, actors, designers and orators on the one hand, and archaeologists and conservators on the other. Lurking on the sidelines are the scavengers of tourism.

There are those who passionately feel that the monuments are there to be marvelled at, studied as they stand, handed on to future generations unaltered save for what improvements may be achievable without their integrity in any way being compromised. These are the self-appointed guardians of the temple.

Their forces, spread thinly over the skirmish ground, are fighting valiantly. But they have responsibility without power – the role of the eunuch down the ages. Their antitheses – the theatrical giants – revel almost openly in an apparent position of strength, having as Kipling (and subsequently Stanley Baldwin) memorably uttered, power without responsibility – the prerogative of the harlot down the ages.

And yet by their own

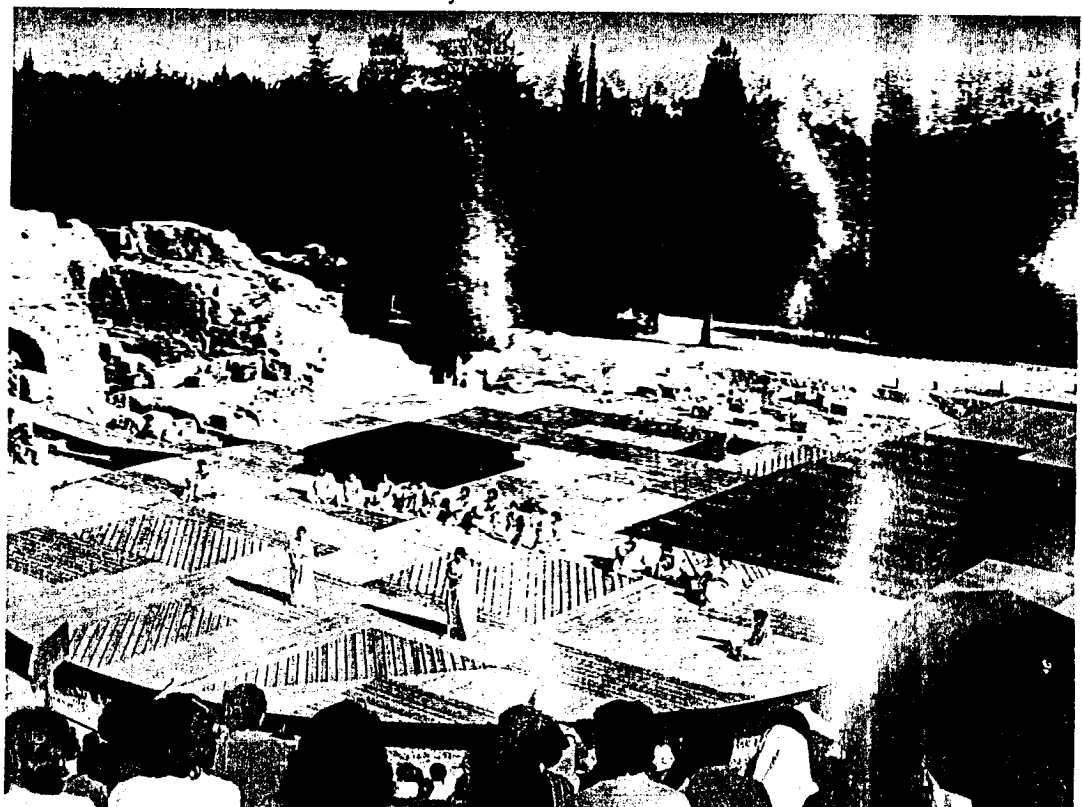
them the theatres at Epidaurus or Verona or the stadia of Merida or Syracuse are places of awe whose past echoes deserve amplification in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. They argue that the integrity of Greek theatre can best be safeguarded by its continued presentation in the places built for drama. Greek tragedy best excites the intellect and understanding of today's audiences if presented upon its original stage.

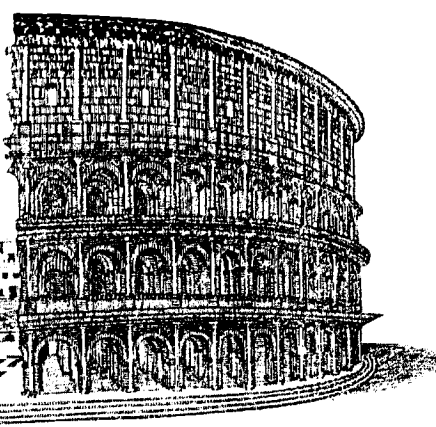
But that is to beg the question of how such dramas were originally produced, and whether the spectacular remnants are sufficiently intact to provide the means of verisimilitude today.

Archaeologists rightly point out that none of these places of performance are intact. Time, weather, neglect and robbery of materials have gradually effaced or removed physical elements. They are not as they were. Retaining walls have collapsed; the symmetrical banks of stone or marble seats have eroded or slipped. The stage and orchestra structures have in many instances disappeared. Their integrity as authentic theatres is marred.

Thus, the conservators over the theatrists' arguments about purity of venue and true sense of place are flawed. In addition, they point out, if authenticity is the aim, then all productions should be staged in conditions faithful to the

A modern-day performance of *Antigone* at the Greek theatre at Syracuse; but how realistic and/or justified are such *in situ* 're-creations' today?





Verona's amphitheatre – as seen in an 18th-century engraving when, arguably, the Grand Tour paved the way for mass tourism to classical sites.

original: in daylight and with the audience conducting business, eating, greeting and meeting outlying friends. The theatre was as much a centre of social, political and commercial exchange as it was a stage for uplifting displays of classical tragedy.

But – the actors counter, shifting their ground – with the reconstruction of lost elements (such as at Verona) and the provision of demountable lighting, sound systems and staging these places can become authentic, albeit temporarily. Darkness, they argue, adds drama; searing heat and glaring sun were, surely, not the conditions preferred by the directors of antiquity? Let us massage authenticity into contemporary reality. And, having done that, what is the harm in us practising the display techniques of modern theatre: scenery flats, false columns, computerised lighting, amplifiers, canned music? The audience today, having been brought up on the most advanced filmic and televisual techniques, demand such things if the Aristotelian principle of a willing suspension of disbelief is to be achieved.

Such are the views of men like Spyros Mercouris, an impresario who organises theatrical productions in ancient remains, and Jose Monleon, the Madrid-based director of the International Theatrical Institute of the Mediterranean. Politically and artistically well connected, they will continue to press for more widespread exploitation of the sites to meet their aspirations. The play's the thing wherein they'll catch the conscience of governments.

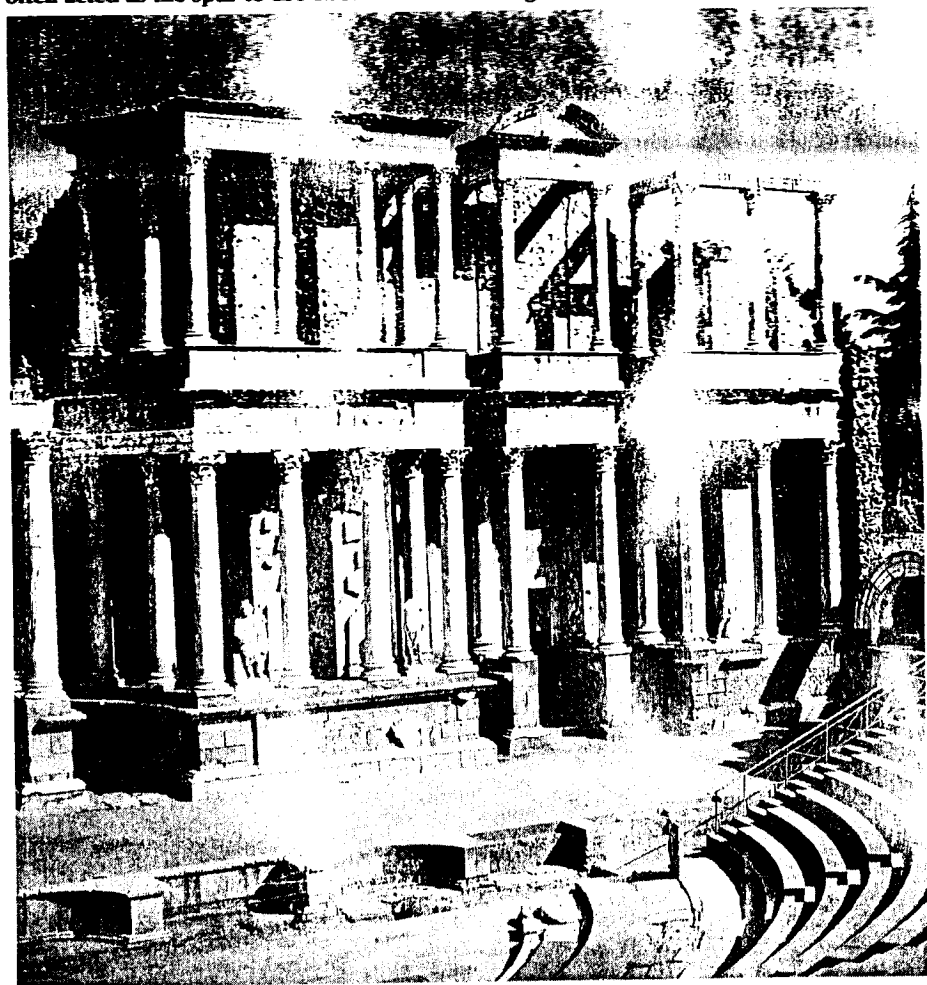
The conservators scorn such specious arguments, but fear the strength of the lobbyists. While national legal frameworks for the long term protection of such sites vary across Europe, archaeologists start from the basic premise of 'preserve as found' – i.e. consolidate what is inherited, whether fifth century BC original or that plus nineteenth century 'reconstructions' –

and to freeze the remains in a stable and, if practicable, accessible condition. 'If practicable' because to permit access may entail the introduction of alien materials or conjectural additions for the provision of such safety features as steps or barriers.

But, as the Assyrians who came down like a wolf on the fold, the cohorts of marketeers want everything to gleam with purple and gold. From long before Byron, these theatres and temples have been lodestones for visitors, whether classical scholars or simple romantics. Today they host thousands of tourists from civilisations as remote in knowledge and awareness as the United States, Australasia, Scandinavia and the Far East. Even Northern Europe, despite the scattered remains of Roman amphitheatres and a smattering of mythology often reluctantly received in school, arrives to gaze in wonder and speculation at the achievements of civilisations which were prey to self-destruction or the unwelcome attentions of the forces of barbarism.

Yet the sirens of tourism see these visitors as an increasingly important economic lifeline – bringing millions in disposable income and foreign currency to countries or regions where unemployment, following the decline of traditional industries, must be reduced. Their concern is to maximise opportunity; the ethos of the monument is not important. Its ability to drag in the punters through any available means takes precedence over the long term scrutiny of its fabric. Quite clearly, they have been

The Roman theatre at Merida, in Spain: the economic needs of particular regions have often acted as the spur to use classical sites to bring in tourists.



successful in many instances, such as Epidaurus, Verona, Merida and Syracuse, in teaming with the presenters. There the fabric has simply been the framework not the *raison d'être*. However, if the laws of the individual countries are such that protective measures either do not exist or enable widespread interpretation, then the consciences of such practitioners are arguably clear.

These conflicting interests were the backdrop to a multinational colloquy staged last September in Sicily, under the auspices of the Council of Europe, with the grand rhetorical title 'A Stage for Dionysus'. Its purpose was to set the scene for the affirmation of the 'Segeste Declaration' on the accepted and acceptable use of ancient theatres and places of performance, taking account of the interests primarily of the conservators, but nonetheless recognising that (within constraints) these ancient places are everyone's inheritance and no one faction should dominate.

Behind that is the Declaration's core message: those responsible for such places must be trained in their proper conservation, management and use. Long in gestation though it may have been, the Declaration is only one small, but deliberate, step towards the Council of Europe's European Plan for Archaeology following adoption of the European Convention on the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage in 1992.

The Plan's wider aim is to reinforce the protection of the archaeological inheritance by developing cooperation across Europe on conservation and enhancement policies, and fostering public awareness of the need to preserve it. A first step is the restructuring of the Pro Venetia Viva Foundation (born of the awareness in the 1970s that the threat of decay to Venice required urgent action) into a European Foundation for Cultural Heritage Skills (EFCHS) with independent legal status and suitable machinery for financing training activities, based on a network of national institutional partners.

Such a foundation would be intended to provide the focus for international exchange of expertise: training and research centres, public authorities responsible for training, heritage conservation and craftwork, trade associations, professional experts, site managers, marketers and others.

A fundamental underlying objective is to build upon the findings of the Getty conference on 'Conservation of Archaeological Sites in the Mediterranean Region' (May 1995), one of whose key conclusions was that all those authorities responsible for sites should establish multi-disciplinary teams before any excavation or other works are implemented. Team leaders could be drawn from any discipline, but once appointed they should have authority for all decision-making on a site within the context of an organisation's internal policy and in accordance with frameworks laid down by central governments.

Training should be provided for the preparation of specialists (archaeologists, architects, art historians, interpreters, presenters, works supervisors and so on) who are or who might become responsible for the management of sites. In this way the apparent conflict between preservers and promoters could result in a greater understanding between them, and an enhanced presentation to the public. The presenters – actors, directors and designers – would also be sure of the scope



The price of progress? Cracked plastic seating covering the original stone of the theatre of Eraclea Minoa in Sicily.

for their creativity. Above all, such consistency would aid the protection of all aspects of the site – fabric, ethos and integrity.

Had such a management framework been in place in Spain, the worst excesses of the treatment of Merida, for example, might have been avoided. Here the ancient remains are seen merely as the carcass for the staging of spectacles: fairy lights and fireworks fixed to centuries-old masonry; seating bolted to the walls; events with no relevance to the ambience or history or original use of the theatre, amphitheatre and stadium. The justification for such excesses, according to its festival director, is because 'Even those living in the most remote villages are familiar from the cinema and television with spectacular display techniques. To draw them to Merida we must offer them excitement and a new experience'. Such lack of responsibility is surely the prerogative of the harlot.

But is it any worse than the tragi-comical treatment of the seating at Eraclea Minoa, a theatre near Agrigento in Sicily? Here the architectural insensitivities extend to the provision of moulded plastic benches (complete with bench ends made of compacted stone dust) fitted over the original but eroded seats. The comedy is that the plastic has degraded under the fierce Sicilian sun and is now so brittle that it represents a new danger; the tragedy is that, rather than removing such inelegant and inappropriate alien additions, the authorities continue to seek further modern solutions in a region whose true potential is minimal.

John Carr was until recently Chief Executive of Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments.