

**Bath Spa University**

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**Icarus extended paper 4**

**Testosterone I sing: a Menippean exploration of the high and the low**

Abstract:

This paper deals with the author's experience of writing a radio play that mixed contemporary ordinary life with the tragically heroic. It uses sound excerpts from the play to illustrate the issues explored.

Biographical note:

Steve May has won awards for poetry, drama and fiction. He has written more than 50 plays for BBC Radio. His book for students, *Doing Creative Writing*, was published by Routledge in 2007. He is vice chair of the NAWE Higher Education Committee.

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In the early 1990s I was researching a play based on the early life of the composer Michael Tippett (it was eventually broadcast in 1995 as *Fair Hearing*). In the course of the research I watched (or tried to watch) a televised version of Tippett's opera *King Priam*.<sup>1</sup> I found it very heavy going. Much posture, lament, and blood. The piece clearly wanted me to take it seriously, but I found this difficult. This raised a question, a research question if you will: why do we take some things seriously, and others not? Is it a failing in me, this inability to be moved by the tuneless posturing of this blood smeared king? And conversely, is there something intrinsically not serious in me?

At the time it seemed as though in order for a piece of drama to be taken seriously it had to involve someone with a terminal illness, or a serial killer, or perhaps be written by someone with either or both of these accomplishments. One could cite the enduring popularity of plays such as Brian Clark's *Whose Life is it Anyway?* written in 1972 but coincidentally for my purposes published by Heinemann Plays in 1993, or Tom Kempinski's *Duet for One*, first performed in 1986 and still going strong. In pure radio terms the apogee of the sickness-equals-seriousness school of drama came in 1997 with Lee Hall's *Spoonface Steinerg*, 'a monologue for a nine-year-old autistic girl dying of cancer'.<sup>2</sup>

Add to this the truism that (failing illness or notoriety) Tragedy was for kings and nobles, Comedy for the common man,<sup>3</sup> and as a writer I was left with an irritating problem: what about the ordinary person, such as myself? Was my life, were our lives really not worthy of serious attention?

I started dipping into the *Iliad* for clues. And even as I read the story of Ajax, who decides to down arms (as a protest against losing out to Odysseus in a contest for the armour of Achilles), the star bowler in the pub club cricket team of which I was captain (stung by an astute tactical decision I'd made) refused to play unless I let him open the bowling.

The parallels were inescapable, even down to the unoriginality of Ajax' action (Achilles had 'kept his tent' way before Ajax did it, and for more compelling reasons), and what you might term his second division status as a hero. As events unfolded on the fields outside Troy and on the municipal playing fields of the North Somerset Cricket League I could hardly avoid putting them together. In fact, it would be more accurate to say that they put themselves together, while I watched with keen interest and increasing curiosity. The colliding and interlocking stories addressed all the questions that had exercised me based on my unsatisfactory experience of *King Priam*: questions involving the nature of tragedy, the relation between sport and war, and art and life, victory and defeat (twin impostors), tribalism, aspiration, and particularly, why do I spend up to 20 hours every summer week involved in this cricket business?

The form of the play that emerged had to to be Menippean, that is 'the organic combination of philosophical dialogue, lofty symbol-systems, the adventure-fantastic, and slum naturalism' [(Bakhtin quoted in Morris (1994) 192.) Appropriately, Menippean satire originated in ancient Rome as a form of writing where Roman authors reacted against Aristotelian 'decorum' by creating a 'counter-genre' that flouted the strictures of Greek and Greek influenced literature.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, the modern cricketers express themselves in blank verse, often with rhyming tags, while the ancient Greeks and Trojans use slang and inhabit a world informed by game shows and reality tv.

And so Ajax refuses to fight, and Breeze refuses to bowl. Rain stops play in Bristol, while the Greeks (ever cunning) claim that Calchas the haruspex has "spotted something dickie in the frogspawn" and so take a time out from warfare. The cricketers take the opportunity for some philosophical discussion of the relativity of standards over time:

CHORUS 1: In 1910 they called Jem Spofforth demon bowling 50 miles per hour.

CHORUS 2: It's all relative.

CHORUS 1: Could Doctor Grace face Curtly Ambrose?

CHORUS 2: These days Caesar wouldn't make lance corporal.

WHEELER: I bet he would. He had an uncle.

CHORUS 2: And history demanded him.

SULK: Let history have him, then. Our masters dupe us to subjection, don't let them swindle our respect.

CHORUS: Never.

CHORUS 1: Indeed the less the man, the more to be admired for his achievements, be they ever so puny in the Wisden of souls.

SULK: Admired but largely ignored. To be truly tragic you must be a king and kill.

CHORUS: Or die in a disaster.

CHORUS 2: Yes, see how delighted is the world, when a cripple writes a poem with hsi nose, albeit drivell.

SULK: Because disease ennobles. It's a substitute for worth. Therefore, whoever wholeheartedly you strive, unless you're born a lord or join the crude freemasonry of slaughter, or fall beneath a six wheeled cart, you'll not be fit for tragedy but denigration in some simpering, comic book.

CHORUS 1: Has ever been thus, fate of mediocre man.

CHORUS 2: His tragedy, that he is doomed to comedy.

In Troy, inactivity breeds unease. Agamemnon suggests that they organise some games to distract them, to which Odysseus responds:

They're sick of games. Once you get a taste for blood, there's little satisfaction in a caber toss.

Odysseus attempts to talk Ajax into resuming battle. In the course of the conversation we learn the ultimate source of Ajax' inner insecurity:

ODYSSEUS: They're saying, it's all the same with fat Ajax, IQ, courage, cock, not exactly extensive.

AJAX: There's nothing wrong with my tackle.

ODYSEUS: How come you keep your pants on in the shower?

AJAX: You noticed?

ODYSSEUS: Come on, spill the beans.

AJAX: [*Confidential*] My penis, though not abnormally small, is not of massive girth or length. And for a hero of my stature, that's as bad as miniscule.

ODYSSEUS: Oh that.

AJAX: It's a secret, so don't tell anyone.

ODYSSEUS: Secret? Balls, it's common knowledge, man.

AJAX: Oh God, I'm buggered.

At the cricket, as the rain eases, and the rest of the team realise that Breeze will not be playing, there's a mealy-mouthed rebellion. The players tell Skip they're not going to play either, they're going home to mow the lawn or attend their wives in childbirth. This provokes Skip to his Henry V moment:

SKIP: If needs be, I'll take them on alone. If you're with me, fine. If not, clear off, the faint hearts, the tame homers, go and find your kids, and take them to the swingpark, trudge museums, hire a windbreak on some oilsmut beach, call on the in-laws, and homeward bound, Do-It-All, to choose your weekend paint. Building yourselves in buildings. Shelve yourselves senile. Meanwhile we, the diehards, sweated in the open damp, we'll do our best, because we're men, determined, brave, we'll take them on, however strong they are, and push them hard, even if we can't win. If we pull together, we may, may just, with luck and guts, face out these ring-capped supercilious bastards, and make them grovel. Even if there's only ten of us, ten united's better than eleven split. What do you say, lads?

So the team take to the field, only to be savaged by the opposing batsmen. Breeze, overcome with remorse, seeing his team being thrashed, begs to play, and eventually Skip reluctantly swallows his pride and agrees to let him. Victory is snatched from the jaws of defeat.

However and meanwhile Ajax, made mad by the goddess Athene (actually Odysseus in disguise), and egged on by his ambitious wife Tecmessa, attempts to murder the Greek kings Menelaus and Agamemnon. Unfortunately, they have been substituted, by a sheep and a goat. Ajax is suitably shamed:

AJAX: A goat? I'll never live it down.

TECMESSA: A little less than king, but more than kind.

AJAX: It wouldn't be so bad if I'd not called the entire army to watch.

CHORUS: We enjoyed it, mate.

AJAX: Enough of that, you're sick.

CHORUS: It's sicker hacking Trojies, don't you think?

AJAX: Hacking humans is manly, hacking goats is bestial.

CHORUS: No way.

CHORUS 1: It's artistic, like culture, cos you're not doing the real thing, you're like imitating an action.

AJAX: So I don't need to feel embarrassed?

CHORUS 2: Hardly. We could start a festival, killing goats instead of blokes.

CHORUS 1: All different countries enter teams.

CHORUS 2: Eventually may come a time when only leather balls are clobbered and goats, like men, reserved for peaceful self respect.

CHORUS: Till then let each man find his goat and savage it, as best he can.

The heart of the Ajax story is clear: a man of physical prowess but no great reflective powers or self-knowledge feels himself slighted or undervalued, and so withdraws his labour. His tragedy is that deprived of the activity that defines him he loses sense of self and self-respect, and takes violent and hopeless action which ruins his previous reputation. The story is as relevant to a Sunday afternoon cricketer as a Homeric hero.

I'll let the play speak for itself in the final moments:

The cricketers are raucous, and start to sing their victorious paean (a simple but lewd song). However, Skip interrupts them, and reminds them:

Let us never forget that a "team" is nothing other than racism made flesh, concentrated in a uniform. Old Plum Cap, who at this very moment sits in Casualty waiting to have his teeth sewn back, might as well be your captain as I am. Only accident of birth makes tribes...Let the victor bear in mind the sourness of defeat, let the loser taste something of the sweetness of success.

The chorus, as is their wont, generalise from this proposition:

Thus is the universe formed in strife, without opposing forces charged, then nothing would event, no matter, no collision and no firmament, no sin, neither pain nor joy

And Sulk/Ajax tops it off with the final and irrefutable:

Remember also that, although success or failure is eternal writ never to be unwrote, one day the sun will burn the planet up, and all our vanities will pass away

And so the chastened players conclude, not with "some raucous sexist song", but with a gentle rendition of *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

### **A coda**

As I took a break from writing this paper, I switched on the radio, and found I was listening to a programme called *OedipusEnders*, exploring the use made by modern soap operas of the story lines of Greek tragedy. I'm not sure how that makes me feel.

## Endnotes

1. There was also a radio play on the same subject, with the same title, broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in 1987, written by Andrew Rissik. I'm not sure if I heard it.
2. Hall is best known as the author of *Billy Elliot*. The above description of *Spoonface* is taken from the British Council Contemporary Writers website, at <http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth02c20n525212626976> (accessed 30 August 2010)
3. See Aristotle (1996) 3. Furthermore, Aristotle claimed that each species is marked by rigidly proscribed 'decorums'; protocols and strategies deemed appropriate for each species 6-13).
4. See Branham (1995) 85-87

## Works cited

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