

# Revolutionizing Greek Tragedy in Cuba: Virgilio Piñera's *Electra* Garrigó

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## Introduction

From its first performance in 1948, *Electra Garrigó* fundamentally altered both the course and the face of modern Cuban theatre. Though inspired by Sophocles' *Electra*, Virgilio Piñera (1912-1979) experiments with the myth of Electra and Orestes' return with an almost Euripidean flair: his version uniquely features an Agamemnon who is still alive and living with his family years after his return from Troy. Unlike other modern adaptations that expand and elaborate upon various aspects of the *Electra* plays (along with the *Oresteia*) as they are transplanted to a different location and context, Piñera's *Electra Garrigó* is the only version, ancient or modern, that not only depicts the entire nuclear family interacting in the same dramatic space but also stages the deaths of both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in the course of its action.<sup>1</sup>

Despite featuring a classical cast of characters in a new configuration, the play nevertheless displays a distinctive Cuban stamp: Aegithus kills Agamemnon in a ritual that mimics a cockfight, Orestes poisons Clytemnestra with a papaya, and a lone peasant acts as chorus while singing to the tune of the popular 'Guantanamera'. Throughout all characters are referred to by both their first name and Cuban surname, e.g. Orestes Garrigó and Clytemnestra Plá. At its debut, this act of 'Cubanizing' and reconfiguring Sophocles' *Electra* (as well as Aeschylus' *Oresteia*) scandalized the viewing audience which consisted of important Cuban theatre critics and directors, many of whom walked out of the performance, one supposedly shouting that the play was 'a gob of spit aimed at Olympus' ('un escupitajo al Olimpo').<sup>2</sup> This animosity could be partly explained by the fact that prior to the

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<sup>1</sup> See Brunel (1971) for a list of *Electra* adaptations from Voltaire's *Oreste* to László Gyurkó's *Szerelmem, Elektra*, which includes the twentieth century adaptations that were known to Piñera, such as Hofmannsthal's *Elektra*, O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Elektra*, and Sartre's *Les Mouches*. On the potential influence of Sartre's play on Piñera, see Espinosa Domínguez (1989) and Piñera (1960), 15 where he claims that he wrote *Electra Garrigó* before Sartre's play became available. For other important modern engagements with *Electra* see also Hall (1999) and Bakogianni (2011).

<sup>2</sup> Leal (1988), 24. According to Morín (1998), 89, the play was considered disastrous by all critics, except for two: Matilde Muñoz of *El Siglo* newspaper and Manolo Casal writing for the *Prometeo*

debut of *Electra Garrigó*, Cuban theatre aspired to be a 'learned' stage, featuring — and fashioning itself after — predominantly European models.<sup>3</sup> This 'serious' theatre was kept entirely separate from other more popular forms, typically humorous and melodramatic types descending from Bufo theatre, a native comic genre populated by stock figures.<sup>4</sup> By uniting these two strands, previously seen as irreconcilable, in a play that appropriated and visibly reconfigured ancient Greek tragedy, Piñera modernized Cuban theatre.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter examines this provocative play, in which Piñera went beyond transplanting (or 'Cubanizing') the myth and inserting local elements into a 'classical' play.<sup>6</sup> Instead, Piñera fuses the Cuban and classical in a play that simultaneously adopts (and adapts) the choral structure of Greek tragedy while parodying — and arguably desacralizing — Greek mythical figures through *choteo*, a distinct form of Cuban humour. This crossing of popular and classical creates an original mix of genres that ultimately works to unsettle the tragic original: *Electra Garrigó* blends tragedy, comedy, farce and melodrama, as well as strands of the absurd nearly a decade before Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, in a play that unsettles the myth of Orestes' return by featuring a living Agamemnon and an Orestes who never left Argos, Piñera contests the function and the purpose of one of Greek drama's most depicted families. With *Electra Garrigó* Piñera thus revolutionized Cuban theatre by challenging the notion and relevance of a 'classic' through the very structures and characters that defined

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magazine issue of November 1948. See Leal (2002), viii and Montes Huidobro (2004), 431 for Casal's favourable yet lukewarm review.

<sup>3</sup> As Leal (1988), 17 summarizes, 'the "serious" and "learned" authors plunged themselves into the history of others, foreign themes, to bourgeois sentimentalism and to the hypocritical superficiality, developing an artificial creation that had no resonances.' All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup> See Moisés Pérez Coterillo's preface in Espinosa Domínguez (1992), 9. On Bufo theatre and its influence, see Leal (1982) and Versényi (1993) 67-69.

<sup>5</sup> As Espinosa Domínguez (1992), 20 dramatically puts it, 'Virgilio Piñera burst in on the Havana scene with the speed of a meteorite and the shaking force of an earthquake. His *Electra Garrigó* is in our theatre a seminal and liberating piece, one that breaks with [the tradition of] salon comedies and lightweight dialogue.' Some critics, such as Antón Arrufat (who later went on to write one of the other most famous Cuban adaptations of a Greek tragedy, a version of the *Seven Against Thebes* which evokes the American Bay of Pigs attack) and Rine Leal, go as far as calling *Electra Garrigó* the Cuban 'battle of Hernani', referring to Victor Hugo's famous play whose debut was just as controversial and divisive; see Espinosa Domínguez (2003), 154-5 and Leal (2002), vii.

<sup>6</sup> That Piñera 'Cubanized' Greek tragedy with his *Electra* is a pervasive notion in scholarship on Cuban theatre, and is a term continually invoked by Piñera scholars; see note 9 below. This is partly due to the fact that Piñera himself employs the term in the preface to his 1960 *Complete Theatre* when discussing *Electra Garrigó*; see Piñera (1960), 9. However, as I demonstrate in the section below, he speaks of 'Cubanizing' as a general tactic available to artists interested in adapting ancient plays for a modern audience.

<sup>7</sup> On the play's absurd strands, see Aguilú de Murphy (1989) and Lobato Morchón (2002).

the ancient Greek tragic form. Moreover, his engagement with the House of Atreus stands out in Latin American theatre, which has tended to find mythical figures of resistance such as Antigone more palatable and more relevant to its stage.<sup>8</sup>

In this chapter I first outline the ways in which Piñera unsettled a 'classic': the innovations that he made to the myth of the House of Atreus which set his play apart from other Electra adaptations. As I argue, *Electra Garrigó* self-consciously performs its difference from the Greek original through a series of provocative scenes that deconstruct ancient characters and conventions. Given that Piñera's version famously features Greek heroes in short sleeves (specifically, in the distinctive *Guayabera*) and wielding poisonous tropical fruit, I then examine the local Cuban elements that Piñera inserted into this classical play in order to interrogate the repeated claim that he 'Cubanized' Greek drama.<sup>9</sup> Finally, I discuss the play's crucial significance for Cuban theatrical and political history. Though reviled in its initial performance, this play, which depicts a young generation that engineers the death of its parents, was upheld as a powerful symbol of the revolution led by Fidel Castro and consciously re-performed in the revolution's aftermath as being emblematic of the transformed nation. Given *Electra Garrigó's* success as a 'revolutionary' play, Piñera also inspired other young Cuban writers to use Greek tragedy as a vehicle for dramatizing contemporary Cuban life: José Triana (*Medea en el Espejo*, 1960) and Antón Arrufat (*Los siete contra Tebas*, 1968) are two prominent examples.<sup>10</sup> Despite these multiple and varied acts of 'revolution', *Electra Garrigó* has long been excluded from accounts of the influence of classical writings in the modern world, and specifically those dealing with the vibrant and diverse afterlife of Greek drama. In this chapter I also aim to correct this unfortunate omission by

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<sup>8</sup> There are few Electra adaptations in Latin America, besides *Electra Garrigó*. In Brazil, Nelson Rodrigues' *Senhora dos Afogados* (1947) deals with the myth, but the work was originally inspired by O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In Ecuador, Electra as a Freudian concept appears on stage in Ricardo Descalzi del Castillo's *Clamor de Sombras* (1951), a psychological drama about the Oedipus and Electra complexes. A series of Electra plays were staged in Argentina, but unfortunately the texts of many of these are difficult to find: these include Omar del Carlo's *Electra al amanecer* (1948), David Cureses' *Una cruz para Electra* (1957), Julio Imbert's *Electra* (1961), Sergio De Cecco's *El reñidero* (1962), Ricardo Monti's *La oscuridad de la razón* (1993), and Roberto González's *La declaración de Electra* (1994). In contrast, there are countless Latin American Antigonas, most famously among them Leopoldo Marechal's *Antígona Vélez* (Argentina, 1950), Jorge Andrade's *Pedreira das Almas* (Brazil, 1958), Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La Pasión según Antígona Pérez* (Puerto Rico, 1968), Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona Furiosa* (Argentina, 1986), José Watanabe's *Antígona* (Peru, 2000). On Antigone as a unique Argentine tradition see Fradinger (2011).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Aguilú de Murphy (1989), 25; Espinosa Domínguez (1989), 80; Carrió Mendía (1990), 876; Cervera Salinas (1995), 152; Pérez León (2002), 118.

<sup>10</sup> See Nikoloutsos and Torrance on Triana and Arrufat respectively, both in this volume.

illustrating that *Electra Garrigó* is one of the most innovative modern engagements with ancient Greek literature. As one scholar writes, had Piñera been based in Paris in the 1940s, his play might have been ‘a staple of the college literary reading lists.’<sup>11</sup>

### Unsettling a Classic

At the outset *Electra Garrigó* gives the impression of being just another Electra adaptation: the first act opens with a young woman dressed in black who steps forward out of her palatial home ostensibly in order to narrate her misfortunes. The opening choral song preceding her entrance had also announced that this would be the case: ‘Electra, now in mournful tones, tells this house’s tale of woe.’<sup>12</sup> However, these expectations are immediately subverted as a robust sixty-year old Agamemnon enters the stage, interrupting the complaints of his daughter. The presence of the Greek leader, which reveals that the nuclear family is still intact, demonstrates that Piñera’s play is not a mere recapitulation of the mythological stories first dramatized by Aeschylus, but rather a radical departure which creates new roles for Agamemnon and his family and demands new responses from the audience. *Electra Garrigó* thus opens with an act of defiance: in one fell swoop Piñera up-ends the myth of Orestes, which is no longer a story of revenge and homecoming, and robs the family of their tragic stature. Piñera’s Electra, for example, is fundamentally denied her characteristic role as a mourning daughter. Since Orestes never left, there is no longer a need for the recognition scene that underpins all Electra plays. Piñera’s innovations therefore deny the three salient elements that, according to Froma Zeitlin, constitute ‘the irreducible minimum that characterizes the Orestes-Electra plot’: return (*nostos*), recognition (*anagnorisis*) and intrigue (*mechanêma*).<sup>13</sup> This act of dislocation is a self-conscious one, as I show, as Piñera forces his audience to witness what happens when familiar characters are removed from their tragic element. *Electra Garrigó* can be thus described as an elaborate experiment with Greek tragedy, in which Piñera tests the possibilities of classical characters and tragic conventions.

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<sup>11</sup> West (1997), 55.

<sup>12</sup> Piñera (2008), 180. All quotations from *Electra Garrigó* are from Margaret Carson’s translation, which is reprinted in *Taylor and Townsend* (2008) and listed in the bibliography as Piñera (2008).

<sup>13</sup> Zeitlin (2012), 361.

Whereas the spectre of Agamemnon's catastrophic death dominates and steers the action of many 'Electra' plays from *Choephoroi* to *Mourning Becomes Electra*, his living presence in Piñera's tragedy serves to unsettle. The play's second act uniquely features a drunken Agamemnon who, for the first time in dramatic history, faces and openly accuses his wife. The stage directions set a very specific scene implying Agamemnon's loss of purpose and heroism: 'Agamemnon enters, wearing bed sheets and a washbasin to imitate the garments and helmet of a Greek leader. He's drunk, but behaves with dignity' (186). Throughout, Piñera oscillates between the absurd and the dignified:

AGAMEMNON: You've cuckolded me, Clytemnestra Pla.

AEGISTHUS: (*Terrified, but pretending not to be*) And who has Clytemnestra left you for, brave Agamemnon?

AGAMEMNON: (*Poking his forefinger into AEGISTHUS's chest*) You, Aegisthus! I know you're sleeping with Clytemnestra, my wife, daughter of Tyndareos and Leda, wife of Agamemnon, mother of Electra and Orestes, Iphigenia and Chrysothemis.

CLYTEMNESTRA: Don't offend us, Agamemnon Garrigó. But we forgive you because you're drunk. I am the forever chaste Clytemnestra Pla.

AGAMEMNON: You have a terrible sense of humor, Clytemnestra Pla. Will you never see me as Agamemnon, King of Mycenae and Argos, from the House of Atreus, brother of Menelaus, leader of the Greeks, who sacrificed Iphigenia? (*Long pause. He looks upwards*). I wanted to lead a vaguely heroic life, but I'm only well fed and middle class. (*Pleading*) Tell me, I beg you, tell me. What is my tragedy? Because I must have a tragedy like all human beings, a tragedy to fulfill, but it escapes me!

AEGISTHUS: (*Sarcastic*) Beer has given him epic dimensions. (*To AGAMEMNON*) You don't have any tragedy to fulfill. You're a happy father who amuses himself by improvising pleasant comedies, a father who is so merry that he dresses up in sheets and washbasins...(*Slapping him on the back*) Go on, Agamemnon of Cuba! Go on, have some more beer! Maybe that will help you decipher the secret of your life.

AGAMEMNON: (*Backing away majestically*) A tragedy! I'm living through a tragedy and I don't know what it is...I'm living through a tragedy; would anyone care to tell me what it is? (187)

In this scene, Piñera insists on a contradictory image of Agamemnon, one that is at the same time both majestic and ridiculous. His epic utterances, which are coupled with his 'dignified' and 'majestic' behaviour (as outlined by the stage directions), stand in stark contrast to his ludicrous appearance. In presenting Agamemnon as a silly drunk who dresses up as a hero while talking and behaving like one, Piñera

effectively marries silliness and nobility and treads the fine line between them. By pushing Agamemnon's death into the dramatic time of Electra and Orestes, Piñera furthermore casts the interesting conundrum of 'tragic overliving' over the *Oresteia*, which, as Emily Wilson points out, is of central concern to plays such as Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides' *Heracles*.<sup>14</sup> Like Oedipus in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, Piñera's Agamemnon is now imagined interacting with his adult children. By not dying, the now well fed and middle-class Greek leader has moreover missed the chance to have a neat structure and purpose to his life. Rudderless, he is instead forced to carry out mundane activities like confronting his cheating wife and her lover. Throughout *Electra* Garrigó Piñera unsettles his viewers by exposing them to multiple paradoxes. This is certainly the case in this scene, which encapsulates the brilliance and complexity of Piñera's theatre in its depiction of a ridiculous but still noble Agamemnon who plays at being a hero with the most mundane of objects. Is a drunk, still living, and continually cuckolded Agamemnon a figure of pity or mockery? The viewer is as clueless as Piñera's Agamemnon.

Piñera's Orestes is similarly denied his tragic role. Orestes Garrigó continually dreams of the day he can leave his family's home. The verb *partir* (to leave), which is explicitly associated with Orestes throughout the play,<sup>15</sup> takes on a particular urgency in the play's latter half:

ORESTES: So the idea is to leave. But how? (190)

CLYTEMNESTRA: You will not leave.

ORESTES: (*pretending*) No one's talking about leaving, Clytemnestra Pla. (190)

ORESTES: Here's what it boils down to: me, Clytemnestra, the columns, my departure...I have to destroy that part of myself that resists, and once I've done that, have to achieve the other goal, that is eliminate Clytemnestra Pla. And then immediately tear down the columns, and then, and then only, leave. (192)

At the end of the play, Electra will furthermore point out the direction of freedom to Orestes by saying: 'Leave! (*She points to the door that is closed.*) Here is the door of your departure. (*Takes ORESTES to the door.*) It's always good to leave...(*Opens the*

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<sup>14</sup> Wilson (2004).

<sup>15</sup> Montes Huidobro (2004), 448.

*door and a bright light enters*) Go ahead! (*With tragic joy*) Leave, Orestes, leave! (195).’ Though some critics have argued that Orestes’ desire to leave Cuba expresses a common feeling among young people at the time,<sup>16</sup> the explicit association of Orestes with parting is, in dramatic terms, an announcement of his now superfluous role in Piñera’s reconceived tragedy. Piñera denies Orestes’ fundamental role in the myth, as a young man who returns and accomplishes a great deed worthy of praise. No longer can he be upheld as a victorious model to be emulated by other young men, as he had in the *Odyssey* or in Pindar’s eleventh *Pythian*. Lacking any purpose, Orestes flounders in the play and can only dream of his exit.

With *Electra*, however, Piñera demonstrates the full extent to which he can unsettle an established tragic character. His *Electra Garrigó* is robbed of her characteristic grief which has served as her primary distinguishing mark since antiquity.<sup>17</sup> *Electra*, no longer allowed the mourning role that typically defines her, has now become the ultimate symbol of self-awareness and theatricality. Above all, Piñera’s *Electra* is a performer. In the beginning of the second act, after *Electra* delivers a long monologue, Piñera stages the reactions of *Aegisthus* and *Clytemnestra* who praise her for her impressive theatrical skills:

AEGISTHUS: Have you finished yet, *Electra*?...Next time it’ll sound better. (*To CLYTEMNESTRA*) She’d be a great actress.

CLYTEMNESTRA: (*Taking ELECTRA’s chin in her hand*) She’s already a great actress. She lives to act. I’m sure she feels nothing. What she shows us is a plaster mask. (186)

Contrary to all other *Electras* who are defined in terms of her relationship to her brother or father, this *Electra* is indeed devoid of her characteristic sisterly and filial duty, and indeed of all passion, who is described as being ‘hardened as a diamond’ (180) and ‘cold’ (189). Instead, Piñera’s *Electra* is a mask, the mistress of ceremonies who controls and guides what will happen. It is she who persuades *Clytemnestra* and *Aegisthus* to kill her father, goads *Orestes* to kill their mother, and convinces *Orestes* to leave, without suffering any consequence. At the end of the play we see her alone, bragging of her success: ‘and the *Furies*? I don’t see them, they haven’t come...No, there are no *Furies*, there’s no remorse’ (195). Instead as *Clytemnestra* had feared (‘Here everything is *Electra*. The color is *Electra*, the sound, *Electra*, hate,

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<sup>16</sup> Montes Huidobro (1973), 141.

<sup>17</sup> This is a grief which has crucially also served as a model for inspiration for ancient and modern actors, such as *Polus*, who according to *Aulus Gellius* 6.5 channeled the authentic grief that he felt for the death of his son into his performance of *Electra* for a production of *Sophocles’* play.

Electra, the day, Electra, the night, Electra, revenge, Electra...Electra, Electra, Electra, Electra, Electra', 193) everything that remains is indeed 'Electra': the play's final words equate the murmur, noise, and thunder to her ('El rumor Electra, el ruido Electra, el trueno Electra, el trueno Electra', 195).<sup>18</sup> Twentieth-century Electras usually seethe with violence, rage, and aggression.<sup>19</sup> Like Euripides, who denies Electra her chief traditional attribute of being unmarried (ἄλεκτρος), Piñera thus fundamentally diverges from tradition by creating a 'cold' and emotionless Electra.

Electra's purely theatrical role and lack of emotion also reveal a fundamental difference between *Electra Garrigó* and other twentieth-century adaptations staged in the aftermath of psychoanalysis. Strauss' *Elektra* and O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which engage with Freudian ideas, are dominated by 'three central and recurring tropes: hysteria, death, and mourning.'<sup>20</sup> In many of these adaptations Electra exhibits various psychological disorders as she wavers between hysteria and melancholia. Instead, the hysteria typically associated with Electra is now transferred to her parents, whose incestuous love for the child of the opposite sex borders on the ludicrous. Clytemnestra describes Orestes as her possession: 'my beloved Orestes will have whatever he wants, he need only ask. Except for one thing: he's to be eternally celibate! He belongs to me. I don't want him to leave, I don't want any woman to enjoy him. I'll be the one he adores, the one to whom he offers sacrifices - bloody or not!' (188). Similarly, Agamemnon openly expresses his passion for his daughter whenever confronted with the idea of her fiancé: 'I love you too much to lose you, Electra Garrigó' (181). Both Clytemnestra and Agamemnon see the other child as a threat, and each plots for his daughter or son to be removed: Clytemnestra actively arranges for Electra's marriage while Agamemnon pushes Orestes to pursue a journey to distant lands. Clytemnestra's extreme love for Orestes transforms her into a hysteric, who actively and continually imagines the death of her son, at which prospect she promptly dissolves into tears.<sup>21</sup> Throughout

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<sup>18</sup> As Montes Huidobro (2004), 454 writes, she is a 'monster who swallows everything up.'

<sup>19</sup> Scott (2005), 7: 'The twentieth century embraced [Electra's] capacity for cruelty and her naked pain, perhaps in an effort to come to terms with the appalling violence in the world around us.'

<sup>20</sup> Scott (2005), 2.

<sup>21</sup> For example: '(Wrings her hands hysterically) Ah, Orestes, don't cross the street!' (182); 'I would die of sadness, dear Orestes...My frenzy would be so strong, that I'd search desperately in the neighborhood for movies about a mother who dies because her child has left!' (183); and 'Anything is possible to a mother who faces the threat of losing her only son. (Crying and ridiculous) Yes, who faces the threat of losing you, Orestes, oh, Orestes!' (183).



the play Piñera inverts both the 'Electra' and 'Oedipal' complexes, which are now projected onto the parents.

Despite these innovations that advertise the play's difference from the original, *Electra Garrigó* could also be seen an attempt to revitalize the traditional structures of Greek tragedy, particularly the chorus. Piñera's adaptation features a singing chorus, who sings décimas, a ballad form of ten-line octosyllabic stanzas. With their songs, the chorus opens each of the three acts of the play, and closes the first and second acts. Like its Athenian predecessor, the chorus introduces the action and theme of the tragedy and comments on the play's happenings, serving as a crucial link between audience and stage. Piñera's chorus also intervenes during critical junctures in the plot, such as the middle of the second and third acts, immediately preceding the deaths of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Thus although Piñera's play is divided into three formal acts that are more typical of comedies, the eight choral interventions divide the play's action into six episodes, making Piñera's tragedy appear in its structure more like its ancient Athenian precursor.

While acutely aware of the structures and conventions that govern ancient plays, Piñera is also sensitive to the disruptions that his alterations now present to the myth and tragedy. The first act, which stages an extended interaction between the now reunited family, ends with a self-conscious discussion of the place of destiny that had motivated other *Electra* plays:

AGAMEMNON: Destiny, oh destiny!

ORESTES: Perhaps I'm destiny?

CLYTEMNESTRA: No, no, no, you're not!

ELECTRA: Yes, yes, yes, you are!

AGAMEMNON: Destiny, oh destiny!

ORESTES: Who will make me leave?

CLYTEMNESTRA: No one! Destiny doesn't want it.

ELECTRA: Then you will die, Clytemnestra Pla.

AGAMEMNON: Destiny, oh destiny!

ORESTES: Will Clytemnestra Pla die?

CLYTEMNESTRA: Will Agamemnon Garrigó die?

ELECTRA: Will Agamemnon Garrigó die?

AGAMEMNON: Destiny, oh destiny!

ORESTES: Will Agamemnon Garrigó die?

CLYTEMNESTRA: Will Agamemnon Garrigó die?

ELECTRA: Agamemnon Garrigó will die.

AGAMEMNON: Destiny, oh destiny! (185)

This scene, which closes the first act, raises fundamental questions about the place of fate and destiny in a play that is no longer a tale of retribution and revenge: what is tragic destiny? Is it fulfilled by the close of this innovative play, which also ends with Agamemnon and Clytemnestra both dead? And is their murder now devoid of meaning and purpose? These questions are meant to challenge — and perhaps even needle — the audience, especially those claiming to possess an intimate knowledge of the source text.

### **‘Cubanizing’ Greek Tragedy?**

By presenting a new conception of ancient characters and chorus, *Electra Garrigó* revolutionizes the Greek myth in fundamental ways. *Electra Garrigó* is also revolutionary in another sense: this is a play that is closely intertwined with Cuba’s recent and tumultuous history. At the dawn of the twentieth century Cuba emerged as a new nation, recently freed from Spanish rule, but one that came increasingly under the direct influence of the United States. In the 1930s Cuban students and intellectuals, Piñera included, attempted to fight the rising authoritarianism of the first Cuban ‘presidents’ who were visibly in the pocket of American business interests.<sup>22</sup> Despite their efforts, the end of their failed uprising saw another dictatorial figure in power, Fulgencio Batista. At the same time as Piñera dared to caricature one of the greatest ancient Greek tragic families by depicting them as bourgeois Cubans (*Electra Garrigó* was written in 1941, though performed for the first time seven years later), the political system in Cuba, fraught with corruption and nepotism, could be described as ‘a parody of Athenian democracy’.<sup>23</sup> The 1940s were a time of social and political unrest, generating a general sense of disillusionment. Piñera’s theatrical depiction of a younger generation that engineers the death of its oppressive and corrupt parents is thus rooted in a particular fraught time and place.

The sights and sounds of 1940s Cuba permeate the play. The chorus which structures Piñera’s tragedy (in the same manner as its ancient predecessor) is very

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<sup>22</sup> As a young man Piñera had been detained several times for taking part in the uprisings opposing the corruption of president Gerardo Machado; see Anderson (2006), 20-1 .

<sup>23</sup> Townsend (2008), 175.

much a Cuban one: the *décimas* it employs were the same ones that filled Cuban radio at the time with passionate stories of crime and romance.<sup>24</sup> Thus though it structures and comments on various scenes, Piñera's chorus is also crucially broadcasting in the sung vernacular mode most readily available to the Cuban masses.<sup>25</sup> The costumes were furthermore bright and suited to the typically hot weather of the island: the men are in short sleeves, with Aegisthus wearing the fashionable white *Guayabera*, and the actor who sings the choral parts wears the white robe of peasants (*guajiros*).<sup>26</sup> Moreover, some characters embody Cuban stereotypes: Aegisthus and Orestes, for example, stand at the two extremes of conceptions of Cuban masculinity, one a swaggering aggressive male and the other a cowardly momma's boy.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Piñera's Clytemnestra proudly advertises her distinct Cuban sensuality: 'while that Clytemnestra doesn't move, look at this one who moves and circulates like a menacing draft of air' (184).<sup>28</sup> Even the stage is 'Cubanized': it calls for a façade of neo-classical colonial architecture much like that found in the old colonial homes in Havana. From its outset, *Electra Garrigó* is audibly and visibly a Cuban play.

Focusing on these elements, critics have emphasized that with *Electra Garrigó* Piñera 'Cubanizes' Greek drama: one of the foremost critics of Cuban theatre, for example, writes that 'Piñera offers us...a beautiful, fascinating and colourful Cuban spectacle.'<sup>29</sup> The play, however, is not a simple act of transference, despite the fact that Agamemnon and his clan are now imagined as a bourgeois Cuban family in the 1940s. In his various writings about Cuban theatre and the significance of *Electra Garrigó*, Piñera himself is conscious of this interpretative possibility. This we can see most prominently in the programme notes to the first performance of the play:

*Electra Garrigó* springs, naturally, from Sophocles' drama. Now, it is not, by any means, another version of said drama, as, for example, occurs in the trilogy of O'Neill *Mourning Becomes Electra*. What has been used in *Electra Garrigó* from the

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<sup>24</sup> The form had been made popular by Joséito Fernández in the radio programme *The Happening of the Day* (*El Suceso del Día*) which recounted a bloody or scandalous deed. Pérez-Galdós Ortiz (2000), 40-3 reports that it was widely referred to as 'the Guantanamo show'.

<sup>25</sup> Montes Huidobro (1973), 144 argues that the *décima* was especially suited for ancient tragedy: 'Just like the dramatic function of the Greek chorus, the native *décima* anticipates and comments.'

<sup>26</sup> Espinosa Domínguez (2003), 153-4.

<sup>27</sup> Barreda (1985), 123. Aegisthus is first described as 'forty years old, very handsome and strong, he's dressed in white, like a Cuban pimp' (181). See above on Orestes' lack of purpose.

<sup>28</sup> On the sexual dynamics of the play, see Montes Huidobro (2004).

<sup>29</sup> Montes Huidobro (1973), 140, who quotes his own review of a 1960 performance of the play which was published in Havana's *Revolution* Newspaper on 8 March 1960. See further on pp. 146-7, where he outlines the Cuban elements present in the play.

[Sophoclean] tragedy are 'characters' and 'atmosphere': the former caricatured and the latter parodied. That is to say that *Electra Garrigó* is not yet another attempt to produce neoclassicism or to update the conflicts of a Greek family from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC....rather it exposes and develops a typical drama [that is pertinent to] yesterday's and today's Cuban family. I am referring to the conflict produced by the sentimental dictatorship of parents over their children.'<sup>30</sup>

In defending his choice of working with a canonical Greek tragedy and its characters, he notes that his aim is to stage the problems of modern family life in Cuba. In the rest of these programme notes, Piñera continues to discuss his characters in terms of their familial roles: Agamemnon, for example, is a 'father of honourable honour' who 'loves his daughter with excessive force', whereas Electra must be reassured that Orestes is 'worthy of being her brother, and not simply the spoiled and effeminate child of Clytemnestra.'<sup>31</sup> By stripping his play of the revenge and retribution that lies at the heart of the *Oresteia* and all *Electra* plays, Piñera has reduced the play to the familial and domestic relationships that exist between the characters. *Electra Garrigó* thus places an intense spotlight on the family, an institution which lies at the heart of Cuban society and culture. In other words, instead of simply 'Cubanizing' Greek drama, Piñera chooses to dramatize Cuban life through a reconstruction of Greek myth and tragedy.

To dramatize Cuban life while using the markers of a serious and established theatrical tradition was then an unprecedented and extraordinary move. The early 1940s were a critical time for Cuban theatre, a time when the most important theatrical organizations were established in the country, such as the Academy of Dramatic Arts (Academia de Artes Dramáticas) in 1940, the University Theatre (Teatro Universitario) in 1941, and the Theatre Council (Patronato del Teatro) and Popular Theatre (Teatro Popular) in 1942.<sup>32</sup> All of these featured an international repertoire, mostly European and North American plays,<sup>33</sup> except for the University

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<sup>30</sup> Espinosa (2003), 150.

<sup>31</sup> Espinosa (2003), 150 and 152.

<sup>32</sup> Vasserot (2008), 166. See also Piñera (1967), 132-3 who also highlights the foundation of experimental theatre company *La Cueva* in 1936 as the first time when Cuban theatrical activity began to organize itself.

<sup>33</sup> Vasserot (2008), 166. Morín (1998), 23-26 recalls the early productions staged by the Academy of Dramatic Arts, which include Eugene O'Neill's *Before Breakfast*, *Becky Sharp* (a play based on Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*), Clay L. Shaw's *Submerged*, and Anton Chekhov's *The Anniversary*. Further on pp. 26-7 Morín muses on the first University Theatre plays, specifically how in the Spring of 1941 the 'University precinct - in the glorious Plaza Cadenas - resounded with the voices of the female chorus, who transformed into song the writings of Sophocles in order to calm and advise the desperate Antigone'; on this production of *Antigone*, see also Miranda Cancela (2006), 34-36. The Theatre

Theatre which focused on theatre 'classics', mostly Greek tragedies.<sup>34</sup> The works of Cuban playwrights were hardly ever staged and were generally kept separate from the foreign models which were considered emblems of 'high culture.'<sup>35</sup>

Initially Piñera wanted the Academy of the Dramatic Arts to produce *Electra Garrigó*, but according to Francisco Morín, who eventually directed the play in 1948, 1958, and 1960, they did not like it because it 'was too strange', citing the fact that the play featured a pedagogue with a horse's tail.<sup>36</sup> Piñera himself recalls that he had also approached one of the founders of the University Theatre, Austrian émigré Ludwig Schajowicz: 'he read the play, told me that he had liked it, but would not put it on. I sincerely don't believe that he was scared by the papaya, the roosters and the Guantanamo...but perhaps he thought of the objections which might be raised by the university authorities, who were, incidentally, happily content to see his productions of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides, but not so happy if they were to see Agamemnon in disguise wearing a sheet and a washbasin.'<sup>37</sup> To insist that the Garrigó family deserved to share the same theatrical space as many European and North American 'greats' was in itself a revolutionary act that challenged the concept of 'serious theatre' for literary-minded Cubans at the time.

The specific examples recalled here as objections to the play, such as Agamemnon disguised with a sheet and a washbasin, also reveal another problem posed by Piñera's adaptation, that of parody. Piñera had openly admitted his intent to caricature in the programme notes when he commented on his use of ancient tragedy's characters and atmosphere.<sup>38</sup> This parodic element can be seen at various points in the play, most notably in the scene above when Aegisthus points out that 'beer has given Agamemnon epic dimensions' (187) or when Clytemnestra imagines

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Council had as its first play *Liliom* by the Hungarian Ferenc Molnar, according to Morín (1998), 39; whereas the Popular Theatre featured O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, and two plays by Russian dramatists: Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths* and Leonid Leonov's *Invasion*; see Morín (1998), 61.

<sup>34</sup> Lobato Morchón (2002), 118 n. 27 mentions that between 1941 and 1946 the University Theatre showed productions of *Antigone*, *Oedipus King*, *Hecuba*, and *Choephoroi* (directed by Ludwig Schajowicz), and *Agamemnon* and *Prometheus Bound* (by Alejandro Baralt).

<sup>35</sup> Muguercia (1988), 11: 'This type of pseudo-artistic theatre satisfied the demands of determined sectors of the petit bourgeoisie which, being in contact with a scene that was in reality poor and banal, fed the illusion of participating in an aesthetic experience that was particularly refined, and not comparable with that which the habitual vehicles of mass culture placed within its reach.'

<sup>36</sup> Morín (1998), 81-2. On the function of the pedagogue, whom I do not discuss in this chapter, see Cervera Salinas (1995), 153-4.

<sup>37</sup> Piñera (1967), 133. On Schajowicz's influence on the Cuban theatrical scene, see Miranda Cancela (2006), 33-47.

<sup>38</sup> Espinosa Domínguez (2003), 150.

Orestes' death in what could be seen as specifically Cuban ways: 'Orestes exposed to the wind, Orestes at the mercy of the waves, Orestes lashed by a hurricane, Orestes bitten by mosquitoes' (182). With *Electra* Garrigó Piñera presents what is at times a comic version of one of the most represented Greek families in Western theatrical history. Yet Piñera's intent is neither to mock nor to present these characters as objects of scorn. Rather, he exposes the play and its characters to a deep-seated part of Cuban culture: el *choteo*, the act of caricaturing or parodying what is sacred or authoritative.<sup>39</sup> To insert *choteo* into the *Electra* myth was not only a crucial part of creating a convincing portrayal of Agamemnon and his family as Cubans, but it also aided in the creation of a modern Cuban theatre. Decades later, when director Francisco Morín was asked to define 'Cuban' tragedy in an interview, he immediately declares, 'a Cuban tragedy is a great *choteo*!' ('una tragedia cubana es un gran *choteo*!').<sup>40</sup> By incorporating the native *choteo* into serious theatre, Piñera initiates a revolutionary theatrical movement in Cuba, resulting in plays in which humour and parody appear alongside the sombre.<sup>41</sup>

This fusion generates a vibrant dramatic hybrid that integrates both vernacular and 'classical' theatrical traditions, which had been until then kept separate. Throughout *Electra* Garrigó Piñera's language has epic, formal, and Cuban elements co-existing with one another: the play features the Cuban counting rhyme 'tin marín de dos pingüé, cúcara mácara titirí fué' (rendered in translation as 'eeny meeny miney mo', 184) alongside Greek epithets and the formal 'vosotros,' which is virtually nonexistent in Latin American Spanish. As he transforms the play into a new mixture, Piñera once again retains and emphasizes aspects of the original: the death of Agamemnon (repeatedly referred to as 'this old rooster') continues to be portrayed as a corrupt sacrifice as in Aeschylus' eponymous play;<sup>42</sup> but this time crucially in the context of a ritual recreation of sacrifice of a rooster, which evokes the rites of Santería and other Afro-Cuban religions that were marginalized at the time. Rather than restating that Piñera 'Cubanized' Greek drama, we should instead

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<sup>39</sup> Mañach (1969), 21 defines it as 'an attitude, a form of not taking anything seriously. Through it, a Cuban makes fun of authority. Anything that inherently entails a sense of authority is transformed in the eyes of a Cuban into a motive for *choteo*'. See also Piñera (1960), 10: 'it is said that when a Cuban jokes, he makes fun of what is most sacred.'

<sup>40</sup> Montes Huidobro (2004), 432.

<sup>41</sup> Piñera (1960), 8-9: 'I am he who makes seriousness more serious through humour, the absurd and the grotesque.' Montes Huidobro (1961), 88 sees this as characteristic of Piñera's entire oeuvre.

<sup>42</sup> Zeitlin (1965).

address *Electra Garrigó's* unique combinations and refigurations of the Hellenic and Cuban.

In the preface to the 1960 edition of his then *Complete Theatre*, Piñera discusses the pitfalls that a modern author who attempts to work with Greek tragedy potentially faces. He not only demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the issues relating to the adaptation of classical works, but he also directly addresses the notion of 'Cubanizing' Greek tragedy:

When I was attacked by the 'Greek bug' (this Greek bug continues to carry out its function as the required violin in the grand orchestra of Western dramaturgy: Hofmannsthal, O'Neill, Racine, Shakespeare and the rest), that is to say, when I felt tempted by the heroes of Greek tragedy, it seemed to me that the end result would be soporific if I limited myself to presenting them on stage more or less masked with the clothing and the thoughts of our era...To me it made no sense at all to repeat Sophocles or Euripides from beginning to end. And I say from beginning to end because the modern author who attempts to handle the tragic Greeks, even if he does not wish it, is inevitably forced to repeat them to a certain degree. Well, I told myself, *Electra*, *Agamemnon* and *Clytemnestra* will have to continue to be themselves. It was two thousand years ago that they were created by authors who knew their people very well. But I also told myself: speaking of the people, that is to say, of my people, would it not be possible to Cubanize them? But, to Cubanize them externally, that is, in terms of clothing, symbols, and language? Such a contribution would not be a negative one; however, it would not resolve the legitimacy and the justification of my tragedy. So that *Electra* would not fall into absolute repetition, so that the public would not fall asleep, I had to find the element, the imponderable, that, as it is said in theatre speak, 'would knock the viewer out of his glasses'. And what is that said imponderable? Here we touch on precisely the nature of the Cuban. In my understanding the Cuban defines itself through a systematic rupture with seriousness.<sup>43</sup>

In Piñera's view, adapting a Greek tragedy in the modern age involves varying degrees of repetition. 'Absolute repetition', besides boring the modern public, is a form of imitation that erases the agency of the adapter, who merely reproduces the ancient for the modern. Even a simple exercise of changing the externals, such as 'the clothing, symbols, and language', also condemns the new work to repetition, as it merely updates the original. Piñera rejects both these models, which to some

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<sup>43</sup> Piñera (1960), 9.

degree rely on the belief that the original text is automatically relevant to a modern audience, and instead advocates a more radical mode of reception, that of 'systematic rupture.' He eschews this model of absolute repetition in favour of an alternative form of repetition, rupturing the seriousness of the original without compromising its tragic ambitions. This is what allows him to achieve the unstable combination of dignity and parody that we encountered in the spectacle of Agamemnon with a washbasin on his head. This notion of repetition through rupture enables him to incorporate the more intimate rhythms of Cuban life and personality into the *Electra* source text, creating a hybrid mix of genres that seeks not so much to abandon tragic seriousness as to change its audience's sense of what this seriousness might be. What Piñera accomplishes in *Electra Garrigó* is not just an exercise in cultural assimilation but rather a more sophisticated attempt to think through the multiple possibilities of tragic seriousness in the modern world.

### **From 'Tasty Little Scandal' to Emblem of a New Nation**

In January 1948 Ernesto Ardura of the Havana newspaper *El mundo* interviewed Piñera, who had recently returned from two years in Argentina. The article, entitled 'The Tone of Cuban Life Today is Foolishness, Affirms Virgilio Piñera' ('El tono de la vida cubana de hoy es el disparate, afirma Virgilio Piñera') outlines Piñera's broad disenchantment with Cuban economic, political and social life.<sup>44</sup> Many were aggravated by the sweeping claims of a man who had only been physically present in Cuba for a short time before openly denouncing his nation in a public interview.<sup>45</sup> Months before *Electra Garrigó* debuted on the Havana stage, Piñera had thus already broadcast himself as a polemicist and provocateur.

As we saw in the last section, the initial hostile reception to *Electra Garrigó* could in part be explained by the fact that Piñera radically broke with theatrical tradition, inserting comic and popular strands into serious classical theatre in order to dramatize the problems of contemporary Cuban life. But it was also crucially affected by Piñera's antagonistic persona. The play premiered only a few months after his controversial comments on Cuban life, on the 23 of October 1948 in the Sala

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<sup>44</sup> Anderson (2006), 61. Espinosa Domínguez (2003), 142-3.

<sup>45</sup> Anderson (2006), 61.



Valdés Rodríguez.<sup>46</sup> The play had all the ingredients of success: it was directed by Francisco Morín, who was then a prominent young director recently returned from studying in New York with the German director Erwin Piscator.<sup>47</sup> The cast was made up of young actors from the newly formed Prometheus collective;<sup>48</sup> the famous singer Radeúnda Lima acted as chorus, singing the décimas of the Guantanamera.<sup>49</sup> Despite these attractions, the play was overwhelmed by the critics' strong and negative reaction to what was perceived to be an irreverent play by a dramaturge with malicious intent.<sup>50</sup> In a letter to friend and collaborator José Rodríguez Feo who was then living in the USA, writer José Lezama Lima described the play's reception among critics: 'the critics, bourgeois idiots, have been tremendously hostile towards him, which surely pleased him and made him dream of protests, hissing and carrots being thrown.'<sup>51</sup> His comments crucially suggest that Piñera's aim was precisely this, to stir up 'a tasty little scandal' ('un pequeño y sabroso escandalito').<sup>52</sup> Lezama's suppositions turned out to be eerily prophetic: incensed by all the criticism, Piñera wrote a biting response entitled 'Beware of the Critic' ('Ojo con el crítico') that was published in the November issue of the theatre journal *Prometeo*, in which he denounced *Electra Garrigó's* critics as frustrated dramatists.<sup>53</sup> His scathing remarks in turn prompted an immediate and public response by the director of the country's most important group of theatre and film-makers (Agrupación de Redactores Teatrales y Cinematográficos, or ARTYC), Luis Amado Blanco. Published widely in multiple Havana newspapers and journals on 15 December 1948, Blanco's article sealed the fate of Piñera, who now became like 'a man infected with the plague'.<sup>54</sup> *Electra Garrigó* was as a result not staged again in Cuba for nearly 10 years, during which time Piñera lived mostly in Argentina.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Espinosa Domínguez (2003), 155 contains Antón Arrufat's recollections on the theatrical space, which was a hall in the José M. Valdés Rodríguez Municipal School; see also Morín (1998), 58.

<sup>47</sup> This was the New York Dramatic Workshop (under Erwin Piscator), where Morín was taught directly by Reiken Ben-Ari, who was a student of Constantin Stanislavski; see Morín (1998), 77.

<sup>48</sup> Espinosa Domínguez (2003), 149 gives a list of actors. On the Prometheus (Prometeo) theatre collective, see González Freire (1958), 130-132, Morín (1998), 82, and Vasserot (2008), 16.

<sup>49</sup> Espinosa Domínguez (2003), 149 and 154.

<sup>50</sup> Espinosa Domínguez (2003), 156.

<sup>51</sup> Rodríguez Feo (1991), 130. Morín (1998), 85 states that 'the work received an extremely severe criticism by the members of the ARTYC simply because they did not understand a play that was far more advanced than they were.' See also Espinosa Domínguez (2003), 149.

<sup>52</sup> Rodríguez Feo (1991), 130.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson (2006), 62 and Pérez León (2002), 120-1. Morín (1998), 85 says that Piñera was alluding to Luis Amado Blanco's own failed play *Suicide*, which had premiered in the Theatre Council five years before *Electra*.

<sup>54</sup> Anderson (2006), 62 -3.

<sup>55</sup> Espinosa Domínguez (1989).

Though Piñera's provocations led to *Electra Garrigó's* ban from the Cuban stage for a decade, the play gained new impetus and significance after the removal of Batista, as Cuba underwent major social and political changes with the rise of Fidel Castro. In the wake of the new Cuban revolution, *Electra Garrigó* was performed several times as an example of the best Cuban theatre had to offer: it was re-staged at various theatres in Havana in 1958 and in 1960, broadcast on Cuban television in 1961 when the play was entered for the international *Casa de las Américas* literary prize (featuring Joseíto Fernández, the composer of the *Guantanamera*, as chorus),<sup>56</sup> and staged again in 1964 as the official selection of the Union of Writers and Artists to commemorate the 'World Theatre Day' in Cuba.<sup>57</sup> The play seems to have been resurrected in February 1958 because it was seen as a 'metaphorical call to end with the tyrant Batista', and various reports mention the public's approving whistles and shouts when Clytemnestra tells Aegisthus to end with the 'old rooster.'<sup>58</sup> Though Piñera had flown back for the February performance, he did not return definitively from Argentina until November 1958, just a month before the rebel army headed by Fidel Castro made its victorious entrance to Havana.

Piñera's earlier transgressions were immediately forgotten in the aftermath of the revolution's new social and cultural programme. As a writer whose work had already prominently featured Cuban culture, he was especially valued. He was appointed as the editor of the weekly cultural magazine *Lunes de Revolución*, Cuba's most important source for its intellectual life.<sup>59</sup> In addition his role as editor of *Lunes*, in 1960 Piñera was also put in charge of Ediciones R, a publishing firm created by the new government, a post which he held until 1964.<sup>60</sup> These appointments not only further confirmed Piñera's worth to the young revolution but they also revealed the weight and importance that the state was now placing on cultural matters. On the first anniversary issue of *Lunes*, Fidel Castro commented on the crucial role that writers would play in the rebirth of their new nation:

Culture in our country was until the triumph of the Revolution a privilege of the minority, a form of slavery and colonialism that twisted thinking, and kept the

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<sup>56</sup> Montes Huidobro (2002), 148.

<sup>57</sup> On the reception of the play see Anderson (2006), 97-99.

<sup>58</sup> Matas (1989), 73.

<sup>59</sup> Montes Huidobro (2002), 19-130.

<sup>60</sup> This editorial also published his 1960 *Complete Theatre*, which then only consisted of seven plays: *Electra Garrigó*, *Jesús*, *Falsa Alarma*, *La boda*, *El flaco y el gordo*, *Aire frío*, and *El filántropo*; see Barreto (1996), 150.

nation from the truth and a knowledge of itself...The Revolution initiates a double contract: the nation begins to discover culture and culture begins to discover the nation. By submerging themselves intensely in the problems, history, and life of our country, now transformed by the extraordinary impulse of its Revolution, young writers and artists will find new media for expression for the national culture.<sup>61</sup>

In an essay published in 1959, Piñera had similarly urged fellow writers to take advantage of the revolution, as the cultural life of the nation was at stake: 'we are at this critical juncture in which an occlusion of our cultural life, however minor it may be, would put us at the risk of death. . . . If we do not take advantage of the occasion, or if we throw it away, we will turn our cultural clock back fifty years'.<sup>62</sup>

When Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir visited Cuba in 1960 at the invitation of Carlos Franqui (the editor of Havana's most important newspaper who had previously directed 'Rebel Radio' from the Sierra Maestra), Piñera and his *Electra* were part of their itinerary.<sup>63</sup> As soon as their Cubana Airlines plane landed, Piñera was there to welcome them, along with other Cuban luminaries such as Franqui, José Alvarez Baragaño, and Walterio Carbonell.<sup>64</sup> Piñera was present during Sartre's famous interview with Cuban writers and intellectuals, and asked him a few questions.<sup>65</sup> Sartre and de Beauvoir were also taken to see a production of *Electra Garrigó*. In a letter dated 1 March, 1960 and addressed to his Argentine friend Humberto Rodríguez Tomeu, Piñera comments that Sartre was among the first to arrive, that he 'clapped and shouted enthusiastically,' and that he hoped to bring the play to Paris.<sup>66</sup> Though unfortunately this was not to be, the episode nevertheless illustrates Piñera's importance as a major figure of Cuban theatre at the time, and in particular *Electra Garrigó's* significance for a revolution that was still in progress. Its many re-performances in the early 1960s were a fundamental part of the narrative of a nation that was rebuilding itself and its canon. The play, which was formerly a call to arms for the new generation, now became a *de facto* symbol of Castro's new revolutionary era, one that had prophesied the changes to come with the new regime.

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<sup>61</sup> Castro (1960), 196.

<sup>62</sup> Anderson (2006), 91.

<sup>63</sup> Ammar (2011), 104-121.

<sup>64</sup> Ammar (2011), 130

<sup>65</sup> Sartre (1960), 44.

<sup>66</sup> Rodríguez Tomeu (1960).

Despite this early recognition of Piñera's importance as a dramatist of the revolution, he soon fell out of favour and *Electra Garrigó* ceased to be performed. On the night of 11 October 1961, Piñera was jailed in a government crackdown on prostitution and homosexuality.<sup>67</sup> Though he was not sent to the notorious camps in which the new government imprisoned homosexuals, Piñera was soon ostracized.<sup>68</sup> In 1964, when Ernesto 'Ché' Guevara saw a volume of Virgilio Piñera's 1960 *Complete Theatre* on a visit to a Cuban embassy in Algiers, he immediately threw the book against a wall, yelling, 'how dare you have in our embassy a book by this foul faggot.'<sup>69</sup> When Piñera died in 1979, it was in obscurity as an 'ideologically suspect' writer that younger writers had to avoid.<sup>70</sup>

Despite Piñera's marginalization in the final years of his life, *Electra Garrigó* once again jolted a languishing Cuban theatre in the 1980s, when Piñera was reinstated as one of the country's most important literary figures. Multiple performances and adaptations suddenly proliferated: the dramatist Flora Lauten created a loose version in 1984 in which the Garrigó family were depicted as a troupe of circus performers; in 1987 Gustavo Herrera created a classical ballet adaptation of the play for the National Ballet of Cuba; a production of *Electra Garrigó* directed by Carlos Piñeiro was shown on television in 1989.<sup>71</sup> The play's frequent ability to revolutionize the Cuban theatrical scene is remarkable, particularly given the fact that it is not an overtly political play like *City of Paradise*, a South African *Electra* adaptation which interrogated issues relating to revenge and retribution in the post-apartheid democracy.<sup>72</sup> The play's continued ability to assume new relevance in different contexts is partly a product of Piñera's own dramatic ambitions, which went beyond updating a Greek tragedy to a particular time and place. Instead, his *Electra Garrigó* is both a renewal of the Sophoclean version, and a probing experiment in what it means to renew.

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<sup>67</sup> West (1997), 56.

<sup>68</sup> Quiroga (1995), 169-70.

<sup>69</sup> Morín (1998), 295; Quiroga (1995), 168.

<sup>70</sup> West (1997), 56.

<sup>71</sup> Townsend (2008), 178; Machado Vento (2012).

<sup>72</sup> Steinmeyer (2007).

# Revolutionizing Greek Tragedy in Cuba: Virgilio Piñera's *Electra Garrigó*

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