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Steven Berkoff, Choral Unity, and Modes of Governance

Steven Berkoff has remained a polarizing and influential figure in British theatre for almost forty years, yet his work has received scant critical attention despite its widespread imitation and regular appearance on British stages. In this article, Jon Foley Sherman identifies choral movement as a key element of Berkoff’s signature aesthetic of exaggerated, precise, and violent movement and language. Tracing a trajectory from his 1971 experiments with Agamemnon to his direction of Coriolanus, this article analyzes the uses to which choral movement has been put, and reveals a startling political development in Berkoff’s work that belies the consistency of his chorus’s manner of moving. His commitment to a particular kind of ensemble performance not only altered the political valences of his source texts, it eventually resulted in a stark assessment of self-government that is rendered more problematic by Berkoff’s deployment of polyracial casts. Jon Foley Sherman is a visiting assistant professor at Beloit College; he recently earned a PhD in theatre and drama at Northwestern University, where his dissertation proposed a phenomenology of stage presence in contemporary performance. One of Jacques Lecoq’s last students, he is also the artistic director of Sprung Movement Theatre.

We have power in ourselves to do it, but it is a power that we have no power to do. Coriolanus, II, iii, 4–5

THESE paradoxical words are spoken by the Third Citizen in Shakespeare’s Coriolanus as a Roman crowd prepares itself to receive the obeisance of a mighty patrician general come to beg their support. The Third Citizen responds to the claim that the throng may deny Coriolanus if they like by saying they could but they can’t: it is up to the citizens to decide Coriolanus’s political future and yet they will have no choice but to support him as Consul if he deigns to show them wounds he has endured in combat for the city’s life.

The operation of will within systems of political coercion sits at the heart of this prickly play and poses a problem for its directors: how to depict the ‘many-headed multitude’ (II, iii, 15) both as a political unit and in its interactions with the apparatus of state power? Steven Berkoff, the celebrated but notoriously ‘difficult’ British director, performer, playwright, and memoirist, has attempted to address this question over the course of three different productions of Coriolanus, the first of which starred Christopher Walken at the Public Theatre in New York, the last of which featured himself in the starring role. Berkoff’s treatment of the Roman crowd may be traced to his particular style of theatre, one that features rigorously trained ensembles executing exaggerated and precise movement sequences. In particular, Berkoff emphasizes the coordinated speech and movement of unnamed characters, which he identifies as ‘choral’ work. The genesis of this style, however, sits far from both the text of Coriolanus and the contexts in which Berkoff directed it.

This article undertakes an analysis of such choruses both in Berkoff’s Coriolanus and in his version of Agamemnon, one of the first plays in which he developed his commitment to choral movement. Figuring a trajectory from Agamemnon through Coriolanus not only provides a genealogy for the movement style of the latter production, it establishes an artistic and political milieu from which Berkoff made a marked departure.

Situating the genesis of Berkoff’s choral style in the milieu of anti-war sentiment in 1960s and 1970s London provides a starting
point for a development that leads from an ethos of resistance to a policy of complicity. In particular, this article will address how in these works the chorus’s dramatic and dramaturgical functions are determined by their physical disposition: not simply where they are but how.

Performance scores for the choruses in these productions will be reconstructed using the published play texts, reviews, photographs, and videos in order to argue that their points of contact and departure reveal a striking shift in Berkoff’s depiction of citizens and soldiers. Detailing this shift not only offers suggestive perspectives on the source texts, it addresses the political complexities of performance adaptation, the intricacies of which were complicated by Berkoff’s forays into polyracial casting.

It also presents an opportunity to engage critically with the work of a theatre artist widely copied and referenced and yet strikingly under-represented in scholarship. His plays are regularly produced at venues large and small, academic and commercial, and they form a staple of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Indeed, the accessibility of his work and the popular success of many of his pieces have earned Berkoff many imitators, making him one of the group of artists who helped lay the groundwork for the surge of physical theatre in 1980s London. Nonetheless, almost all of the texts on Berkoff’s work appear in British newspapers (to which Berkoff himself is a frequent contributor) or as reviews, and none of them has featured a sustained analysis of how his movement style informs the politics of his productions.

Elements of a Style

Berkoff began his career as a student at the Webber Douglas Academy in London, after which he spent a decade (1958–68) playing sporadically in repertory theatres across England, occasionally landing film and television roles. Inspired by Peter Brook’s experimental Theatre of Cruelty season at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art (LAMDA) during 1963 and 1964, he sought further training, notably with the movement instructor Claude Chagrin and her teacher, Jacques Lecoq. Eager to provide himself with the kinds of opportunities revealed by his training and increasingly bitter about his inability to secure full-time employment in the theatre establishment, he founded the London Theatre Group (LTG).

With his adaptation of In the Penal Colony in 1968, Berkoff began a string of critically lauded Kafka adaptations that included Metamorphosis (1969) and The Trial (1973). After other adaptations, which included Agamemnon (1973), Berkoff began writing his own plays, gaining particular notoriety for his ‘cockney carnival’ plays such as East (1975) and Greek (1980), a version of Oedipus set in the East End, featuring Berkoff’s by now trademark physicality and brutal language.

In 1979, he began an engagement with Shakespeare that would see stylized productions of Hamlet (1979–82), Coriolanus (1988/1991/1995), Richard II (1994/2005), and Shakespeare’s Villains (1998–), one of a series of one-man shows that Berkoff devised and performed in the 1990s. From the 1970s onwards, Berkoff toured worldwide and took on directing abroad and in London; he also oversaw the publication of his adaptations and scripts in several languages and started writing numerous memoirs and editing production journals for publication.

Referring regularly to a desire to use his whole instrument as an actor, Berkoff’s plays and his direction require virtuosic physical control, almost always displayed in extensive use of mime. He argues that, ‘Mime demands exactness as any ritual must since it is mutually shared with the audience whose imaginative participation is required to make it live.’ His use of costume often serves to highlight the actor’s body, leaving arms, legs, and sometimes torsos exposed. Given the nature of his scripts, the actions enacted are often brutal and exaggerated, involving a ‘large’ style often characterized by freezes and poses of easily identifiable attitudes and actions.

In keeping with his belief in mime, Berkoff prefers a bare stage with a few chairs and rarely uses built settings – the notable exception being the abstracted cage/jungle-gym...
for Gregor’s room in Metamorphosis. Berkoff writes:

A set that is solid seems a dead weight on a stage whose message should lie in what is imaginative and ephemeral. It cannot be moved and seems an absurd piece of evidence to remind an audience of time and space.  

With his stark visual style he sought to stimulate his audiences through movement and image. In a revealing passage he claims:

Only by stretching the audience’s imagination to its fullest can one hope to entrap the enemy: by working the vulnerable underbelly of the audience, its emotions and then its insatiable hunger for visual stimulation, and then, finally, the words themselves.

Consistent with Berkoff’s chosen role as an outsider, the audience is characterized as an antagonist whose lack of will both makes them resistant to theatre and especially susceptible to its power, a power Berkoff claims to marshal through image and then sound. This often results in dialogue and exposition accompanied by mime sequences doubling or commenting on the text. The vision served by these sequences has remained fairly violent. His productions are populated by thugs, grossly inadequate fathers, and women alternately fearsome and masochistic. His use of mime, large gestures, and strong vocal work binds his characters to their actions and renders them as clear and straightforward as his tableaux vivants.

Berkoff’s Concept of the ‘Choral’

The rigorous training and ensemble coordination required by this work reflects Berkoff’s commitment to the actor as the most dynamic scenic element. For Berkoff, a tightly drilled group of performers is best positioned to carry off the work of a chorus, responsible for swiftly changing onstage locales and providing opposition for (anti-) hero protagonists facing the forces of society ranged against them.

Berkoff claims to use choral effects in many of his scripts, describing everything from background noise to group movement to an individual character’s third-person narration of his actions as ‘choral’. Virtually any spatial or temporal transformation that is enacted by a group of performers constitutes ‘choral’ work for him: a chorus may thus be a group of characters, a group of bodies, a duo, or a single person. The salient point here is that a chorus is an internally directed and purposeful group moving and speaking with one intention. It is in this sense that I will use the terms ‘chorus’ and ‘choral’.

In his plays with smaller casts, the shift between character and chorus tends naturally to depersonalize secondary characters, leaving them clearly at the service of the protagonist. In these plays, the use of ‘choral’ movement serves less to establish a community against or for whom the protagonist moves than to illustrate his (it’s always a man) inner state. The protagonist forging his identity by means of, not against, the chorus.

Berkoff’s work is thus shot through with an Expressionist streak, requiring actors to embody interior states and environments against which the protagonist struggles. In his Agamemnon and Coriolanus, however, the chorus exists as a character itself. Rather than being embodied by named characters who sporadically illustrate environments or internal states, the choruses here are a collective who appear as a dramatic entity in relation to the protagonist.

‘Ghosts of Men who Died for Nothing’

Aeschylus’ Agamemnon, the first part of the only extant Athenian trilogy, the Oresteia, provided Berkoff with strong material for a chorus. It received its first staging in 458 BC, arriving within ten years of the introduction of the second and third characters in Athenian drama, and thus featured extended passages for the chorus, which was figured both as instrument of exposition and political unit within the story.

Aeschylus does not even bring on the eponymous, doomed hero until well past halfway through the play. If any character could be said to dominate the play, it is Clytemnestra, whose confrontations with the chorus display her will and her strength.
Indeed, as Edith Hall argues, the representation of an ‘autonomous, proactive, amoral, and politically triumphant queen’ would likely have been so outlandish to the first Athenian audiences that the play was either dropped from the trilogy or never performed without its companion pieces, in which she is not only vanquished but her murderous crime expiated by Athena in the act of establishing both the Athenian courts and the rules of citizenship through patrimony.12

**The Chorus in *Agamemnon***

The chorus possesses the majority of the text in the Aeschylus, and yet to a twentieth- (or twenty-first) century reader, for most of their time on stage they serve less as characters than as engines of exposition: their songs recount the history of the House of Atreus, Paris’s abduction of Helen, how Agamemnon slaughtered his daughter Iphigenia to free the Greek fleet from Aulis, and the Argive population grown restive and weary from years of war and loss.

David Raeburn reminds us that choral speech was both connected to the ritual function of the festival in which the plays were first performed and that it was explicitly used in ritual onstage in the last two plays of the *Oresteia*.13 He argues that ‘We accept that the principle of *euphemia*, right utterance, applies as much to what the solo actors have to say as it does to the Chorus’. Thus, the choral speeches are less about recounting history than actively attempting to provide good omens for their king. The chorus’s speech constitutes events insofar as the chorus ‘keep[s] trying, though failing, to use propitious language’. Their inability to speak anything other than ‘ill-omened’ language enacts the unstoppable tide of doom about to crash down on their king, whose actions are the subject of much of the chorus’s speech.14

Yet, even in these moments the chorus is not a character in the narrative: they reflect its drift and prepare the stage for Agamemnon’s arrival. It is not that the chorus speech itself dooms Agamemnon, but rather that it reflects his inevitable punishment. Outside these speeches (the Parodos and the Stasima), there are five occasions (the Episodes) when the chorus stands as a *dramatic* entity. In the first four of these, they are chiefly witnesses, expressing alternately their disbelief, their gratitude, or their fear, while maintaining a posture that keeps them free from influencing events. Only in the last Episode, their confrontation with Clytemnestra and Cassandra, do they appear capable of *action* or altering a character’s behaviour or the course of events. But their promise of revolt is short-lived: Clytemnestra halts them before Aegisthus’s guards can cut them down, and they are left offering further ‘ill-omened’ speech.

While Berkoff maintained versions of these scenes, he redistributed the chorus’s dramatic weight by moving them back and forth in time. In place of singing extended choral odes, they acted out the passages that are spoken as memory in the Aeschylus; in place of attempts at ‘right utterance’ they enact. In effect, there are *two* choruses: the ‘first’ chorus of Argive elder men, and the ‘second’ chorus of Greek and Trojan soldiers.

The action subsequent to the conflict between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, already a large portion of the choral speech and song, becomes the heart of the play, with the battles in front of and in Troy staged as set pieces for the production. Where Aeschylus’ chorus addressed sacrifice through third-person song, Berkoff’s warrior chorus performed acts of sacrifice in the first person, appropriating the larger portion of choral speech for (re)enactment. Indeed, Jonathan Hammond found that the production ‘relies too much for its overall effect on imaginatively choreographed battle scenes’.15

Berkoff’s emphasis on the chorus as dramatic unit takes place during a ‘performative turn’ away from the ‘static solemnity’ of mid-century choruses.16 It was also, Berkoff notes, part of his response to the ascendant practices of the celebrated London and New York theatrical fringes of the 1960s and 1970s.17 He was surrounded by examples of theatre companies resisting the dominant resident company model embodied by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which in practice became a star-making machine that drew
a chosen few ‘up’ from the ranks (from the chorus) and into plum roles. In contrast, companies such as Freehold, 7:84, and Welfare State featured ensembles rather than individuals.

These companies, and Berkoff’s LTG, were active during a period when ‘collectives’ referred first to political and social units and then to theatrical modes of production. Theatrical collaboration was understood to be as much a political choice as an artistic one, and was staged in opposition not simply to other theatrical models but also to political ones. The increasingly prominent appearance of group speech and movement in British and United States theatre coincided with multiple crises across the globe with which the two countries were directly involved. In the case of both countries, their governments often took actions against the will of many of their citizens. Berkoff’s _Agamemnon_ was thus devised at the beginning of the Troubles in Ireland and at the tail end of the fiercest opposition to the war in Vietnam, in a London theatre scene that had nurtured anti-war protest and rhetoric for years.

**A Free-Floating Sense of Outrage**

Berkoff maintains an ambivalent relationship with overtly political theatre. On the one hand, he has disparaged the ‘obsessively realistic, plausible, social, and naturalistic’ productions through which much British theatre staged political opposition. He also claimed that art bears no allegiance to anything, that ‘it is a selfish, grasping thing.’ And yet there is no mistaking the overtly political content of _Agamemnon_ and his 1980s critiques of Thatcherite England. In addition to _Greek_ and _Decadence_ – both savaging the societal depredations resulting from Thatcherism – _Sink the Belgrano!_ (1986) directly concerns the Falklands War and features a (characteristically, for Berkoff, grotesque) portrayal of Thatcher.

Nonetheless, Berkoff was preoccupied less with political action than with his own artistic expression: his disdain for ‘political’ theatre was not that it addressed contemporary issues, but that it did so at the cost, according to Berkoff, of invention and excitement on stage. There seems no questioning Berkoff’s sense of outrage, and yet its free-floating quality perhaps speaks to concerns more personal than communal: he was not only willing to attack the political leadership of England, but to break a British Actors’ Equity 1997 strike by recording a voice-over for McDonald’s, a company he has subsequently vilified.

Thus, when Berkoff writes in his introduction to the published script of _Agamemnon_ that it is ‘about heat and battle, fatigue, the marathon, and the obscenity of modern and future wars’, he may be understood to be taking advantage of the conflict in Vietnam as a pretext rather than a subject. In terms of the play, Berkoff’s concentration on the chorus shifts the focus from the inescapable consequences of a conflict between duty and family embodied by Agamemnon’s original sin – the murder of his daughter Iphigenia to release his fleet from Aulis. Instead, the performance concentrates on the plight of the nameless soldiers who butchered each other before the walls of Troy and the returning Greeks of Agamemnon’s party who were drowned at sea.

The lengthy battle sequences diminish the space left to the choral song of Iphigenia’s sacrifice, downplaying Clytemnestra’s search for vengeance and emphasizing the slaughter of the soldiers. Through their reenactments and their opposition to Clytemnestra, the chorus achieves a kind of solidarity based on class (lower vs. upper) and sex (male vs female). The chorus becomes the main character of the piece.

Berkoff weighted his production process accordingly: creating the chorus for the London productions, he spent weeks in rehearsal engaged with exercises and improvisations. Although he turned from this practice as he became a director for hire, at this point he fervently believed that a chorus could only achieve the precision and cohesion necessary to their task through prolonged physical training and exploration. The arrival of _Agamemnon_ and his cohort exemplified the powerful physicality displayed by the warrior chorus. For this entrance, the
chorus mimed a troop of horses galloping across the Argive plain in a prolonged and intense display; in the Roundhouse production, they wore ‘elongated horse masks’ and were accompanied by drums and ‘brass instruments screaming’.27

In his hyperbolic stage directions, Berkoff indicates that the entrance is to be so grueling that chorus members risk heart failure.28 This entrance repeated that of the Herald who must run in place for five minutes before delivering his two-page speech. Of these two moments, James F. Gaines wrote:

The Run of the Herald turns every strained muscle into a study in pain and an omen of impending death. The thundering arrival of Agamemnon and his cavalry in Argos is . . . [an] effective expression of the brute force of war.29

By transforming from Argive elders into soldiers, the chorus is at the heart not only of the narrative, but also the action, set in tableaux of battle and massacre. Sometimes accompanying their own description, sometimes acting out the narration of the Herald, the (second) chorus embodies the strain and savagery of battle, rendering both conquering Greeks and vanquished Trojans victims of the same brutality.

Through extended movement sequences featuring freeze-frame or tableaux, slow motion, and vocal work accompanied by drums, Berkoff choreographed the struggles between soldiers, and between sailors and the sea. During these sequences, the chorus fought itself, with individual members dying over and over again, rising to kill another and dying yet again, their constant ‘resurrection’ conveying both the futility and endlessness of battle.

Berkoff’s approach to the battle sequences changed over the course of the different productions: in addition to mime, a constant in all productions, he originally gave the chorus wooden poles with which they created lines of tension and contact between their bodies in battle. The poles appear to have worked as figurative vectors of force as well as literal spears in combat. In the Israeli production, the poles were removed, the actors given football shoulder pads under their costumes, and the bodily contact was less abstracted and more animalistic: hand-to-hand combat in a tangle of limbs with little or no room between the actors’ bodies.30 Yet even when the poles were removed, the battles were not merely free-for-alls but highly choreographed tableaux. These tableaux, in fact, may be the source of the critical discontent with the first London production (they are mentioned explicitly as a ‘bad idea’ in a review of the Los Angeles production).31

The Chorus Overawed

While his goal was to portray ‘the obscenity of modern and future wars’, his style risks portraying battle, despite the bloody language accompanying it, as an abstract contest. Writing of Berkoff’s work up to 1976, John Elsom notes that Berkoff was particularly concerned with carefully organized movement patterns, performed by the group in a style which was not quite dance, not quite army drill, and involved some mime. Improvisation would have been out of step as well.32

Considering this appraisal next to Jonathan Hammond’s critique of Agamemnon above, one begins to understand why the ‘chaos’ Berkoff sought to portray did not materialize: the tidiness of the choreography provided a mask for the violence and suffering it represented.33

Enacting both sides of battle, the warrior chorus turned relentlessly in on itself, shattering in a manner echoed later by the elder chorus’s disorganization facing Clytemnestra. Whereas the warriors’ deaths are mourned as a useless compliance with authority, the elders splinter when attempting to overcome authority. Both choruses are less the embodiment of the ‘tensions between the individual and the collective’34 than a character in the unequal contest between ruler and ruled.

Their inability to organize except at the behest of their rulers condemns the chorus to the cycle of violence they hoped had ended with the destruction of Troy. When the Herald announces the Greek victory, the chorus of elders asks:
Have you not seen the end of evil
the end of pride
will you stick your fingers to your head
when some asshole with a stripe slithers by
will you stick your fingers in the fire
it’s just the same . . .
no more . . . no more horrors.35

But they are as awed by Clytemnestra as the soldiers are by Agamemnon: the chorus wilts in front of their leaders. The Greek soldiers burn with resentment at their slaughter for Helen’s recovery, but this never builds to action, as it is replaced by eager support of their leader when in his presence. And though aware of their exploitation by the ruling class, the Argive citizens are tied hopelessly to the fates of their kings and queens. When the chorus hears Agamemnon’s cries as Clytemnestra butchers him offstage, they briefly consider revolt before deciding:

We cannot bring him back to life.
True, so what do we do?
Think. Make our enquiries first.36

Upon Clytemnestra’s confirmation of the murder, the chorus insults her and attempts to shout her out of the city, but the arrival of her lover and conspirator, Aegisthus, quashes their protest. This is a striking departure from Aeschylus’ version, where the Chorus howls in protest and readies to fight Aegisthus and his bodyguard before Clytemnestra intervenes and stops what would have been the slaughter of the choral assembly ready to give their lives.

Not only does Berkoff refuse Clytemnestra her ability to halt the chorus with her words, turning instead to the bullwhip-wielding Aegisthus, he also depicts the chorus of Argive elders as more powerless than in Aeschylus. We do not see them try to rise against their oppressor; instead, they snipe and mutter darkly but remain without resolve. They are left to bemoan that the unstoppable tide of violence will continue until the house of Atreus is once again purged by blood.

This Agamemnon had a new tragic hero. Transformed from the weak elders left behind into soldiers fighting for their lives, the warrior chorus occupies the role of a character whose fate is at once inevitable and avoidable, and they join Agamemnon’s first victim Iphigenia among the ranks of the play’s unjustly killed. Enacting their own countless deaths only to revive and slaughter and be slaughtered again, they are self-aware but powerless pawns of forces they have chosen to obey; hoping for peace they are nonetheless willing to fight on command. Their tragedy is not so much that they struggle against forces stronger than they, but that they do not fight hard enough against those they can.

Berkoff’s Agamemnon staged the fate of citizens that follow a leader who has no use for their opinions. It did so, first, at a time when anti-war protest across Western Europe and the United States was perceived as incapable of checking the United States government’s continued dedication to bloodshed in Southeast Asia. The chorus’s obedience to this kind of authority results in their violent, avoidable deaths; they turn against themselves in mimed sequences of battle with Trojan and Greek ground into the same dust. Victory is a bitter and meaningless reward for an enslaved people.

In a telling aside at the end of the play, Clytemnestra urges Aegisthus to ‘Ignore the mob’.37 A chorus is no mob, possessed of greater coherence and an inner drive. And yet this is the condition to which Berkoff reduced this chorus by staging its inability to organize itself against another unjust ruler; they lose their cohesion and fall to pieces (be)for(e) one murderer after another.

‘Pluck out the Multitudinous Tongue’38

No such tragedy befalls the Roman citizens of Berkoff’s Coriolanus. These men, in contrast, do not deserve the leader they are given, choosing instead the manipulating and deceitful tribunes. For an already notoriously anti-democratic play, Berkoff ratcheted up the politics of individual virtue and group weakness even further, and did so precisely by transforming a Roman mob into a chorus.

Berkoff wrote in The Theatre of Steven Berkoff that he conceived of Coriolanus as a series of binary conflicts: ‘Plebeians versus
Autocrat, State versus Individual, Aufidius versus Coriolanus, mother versus son’, and that the Chorus ‘is central to the play’. He notes elsewhere that he spent a great deal of time training and devising with this chorus, as he did with *Agamemnon*.40

What appears novel here is that there is not, strictly speaking, a chorus in *Coriolanus*. Shakespeare’s Roman citizens nowhere in the play function as a classic chorus: they do not sing ritual songs portraying past events, they do not serve as witnesses to action, nor do they provide exposition. They neither offer mediation between the action on different areas of the stage nor do they effect changes of locale or time. All of these actions require the concerted effort of an internally directed group, a quality that appeared and dissolved at key moments in Berkoff’s *Agamemnon*.

On the contrary, Shakespeare’s ‘rabble’ are characterized by their inability to operate in concert at all. They are unruly, dispute amongst themselves, are possessed of fickle and divided loyalties, and, most importantly, they do not present a coherent standpoint from which to oppose Coriolanus or the tribunes. Indeed, they prove capable again and again of changing their principles in response to both argument and coercion.

However, in the context of a state struggling to find a robust form of governance, the crowd’s instability need not signify weakness: as several commentators argue, the very ability of the citizens to debate and accommodate more than one viewpoint stands in contrast to the single bloody-mindedness of their chief antagonists and ‘could be a strength to a free republic’.41

As the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus required a chorus through whom to communicate the march of fate, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* required a fractious crowd to portray Rome’s political situation. The crowd’s disorganization is central to the action of Shakespeare’s play, which repeatedly stages the questions of what relationship rulers should have with citizens and how the state is organized. By incorporating his familiar choral technique into the staging of the Roman crowd, however, Berkoff appears to have disrupted the portrayal of a crowd that is seeking consensus, with potent political implications.

In reviews positive and negative, critics described Berkoff’s chorus as moving ‘in a synchronized shuffle’42 with an ‘automaton rigidity’,43 and ‘explosive energy contained by rigid discipline’44 in ‘sharply choreographed movement [as] an excellent, tightly drilled company’.45 During the Munich production, Berkoff noted in his journals:

Now, quite normally – and it’s satisfying to watch – they are starting to think and perform like a body. They suggest, remember for each other, correct and adjust as if the body were repairing its own wounds.46

Even in the opening scene, where the crowd argues with itself, Berkoff had them moving so that they appeared as a whole rather than as fractured parts. William Over wrote of the New York production:

Although the effect was to demonstrate the fickle-ness of the Roman citizenry, a manifestation of the irrational forces that shape public opinion, the movement of the acting ensemble in this scene was precisely choreographed, as in Greek tragedy.47

This sense of unified precision acts counter to the undisciplined citizens depicted in Shakespeare’s text and results in a different role for the assembled crowd. Both in the text and on Berkoff’s stage, the mob is weak and requires leadership; in the former, however, the structure of that leadership and its relationship to the crowd is at issue. For Berkoff, who channelled the crowd’s many voices into one, the issue of leadership is clear.

Garry Wills, in his review of the New York production, complained that in the Shakespeare, ‘The Roman people . . . are not a single “character”’, as Berkoff had staged them.48 By making them into this single character, Berkoff renders the crowd incapable of offering a dynamic mode of political discourse as an alternative to the authoritarianism of the patricians. They are instead simply a negative force, a threat to Coriolanus rather than a viable political model worthy of sympathy or respect. Their opposition to Coriolanus, already tinged with personal dislike in Shakespeare’s text, becomes
both wholly capricious and personal, unrelated to the merits of any political system or to the citizens’ legitimate grievances.

The Question of Governance

In the place of contrasting modes of governance Berkoff instead stages a contest over whether Coriolanus should be the leader of the city state. The question of the play resolves to whether or not Coriolanus is fit to rule, not whether a single man should wield so much power over the state or what other alternatives might best suit Rome. As Steve Cavell points out, a united chorus simplifies the play’s political struggle to a question of patricians versus plebeians – precisely the binary Berkoff sought to emphasize. Staging the plebeians as a chorus, he changes and coarsens the political argument of the play by opposing Coriolanus with a homogenous entity that obscures the principle and dynamics of republican government.

To be sure, the merits of the tribunate are by no means clear in Shakespeare’s text. Oliver Arnold notes that critical opinion has recently shifted from regarding the play as hopelessly slanted against the crowd to an understanding of the play as an eloquent plea for the broader enfranchisement of the citizens. And yet later arguments, such as Annabel Patterson’s – that Shakespeare unabashedly celebrates the plebeians and ‘republican political theory’ – founder on closer examination of what happens to the plebeians once they are given political representation. According to Arnold, the crowd in Coriolanus is indeed self-aware, pluralistic, and capable of reason. Until, that is, they are granted representation by the tribunes, whose appetite for power and disgust for the plebeians matches that of the patricians.

The crowd, after all, did not even seek political representation at the play’s opening: their goals were access to corn and the death of the patrician Coriolanus (at the opening of the play still Caius Martius) who most opposed them (I, i, 4–80). They are, in effect, co-opted by a new class of politician which intervenes not only between ‘the people’ and government, but between the people and their own wishes: ‘The institutionalization of popular power transforms the citizens . . . into the fickle and confused rabble Coriolanus scorns.

And yet Berkoff’s habits of choral movement do more than question the probity of representative government; they also deny the citizens whatever wisdom and deserved confidence they had before their subversion by the tribunes. Arnold argues that ‘political representation turns the citizens into a mindless, undifferentiated chorus’, but, as I have argued here, Berkoff stages this chorus from the beginning. Rather than finding himself adrift in the unruly public, hamstrung by his own sense of privilege and distance from those he ranks below him, Coriolanus is confronted with an ungrateful mob whose frailty and irrationality serve to endorse authoritarian rule.

Staged as a formless, chaotic mass, the mob may represent the uncertainty and disquiet of republicanism, a troubled but potentially productive form of government: the spectacle, as well as the content, of public debate encourages participation and dialogue amongst informed citizenry. Once they are depicted as a misguided majority, however, Coriolanus’s ‘refusal to temporize with them’ becomes ‘an act not so much of class arrogance as moral integrity’. Additionally, the choral unity magnified their internal weakness in confrontation with the patricians, who single-handedly dispatch them.

Whether staged as Coriolanus scattering the mob in the market like a strong breeze cleaning the clock of a dandelion, or the patrician Menenius arresting their momentum across stage with his rhetoric, these plebeians have no strength in numbers. By binding them through movement while not granting them any moral strength, Berkoff presents a citizenry with nothing to offer but their possible manipulation.

Just as in Agamemnon, the same performers portray the citizen chorus and a martial cohort, both the Roman and Volscian armies. Wills argued that this ‘promiscuous’ multiple role-playing flattens distinctions between different characters and political groups,
but this assumes Berkoff and the Public Theatre had the resources to hire an enormous cast that would include, separately, a Roman mob, a Roman army, and a Volscian army. Doing so would have been no less promiscuous, albeit with the producer’s money instead of with the actors. In any event, there seem to be significant distinctions between the portrayal of citizens and soldiers; as in Agamemnon, these differences suggest a political argument, albeit one of a very different character.

On the one hand, the Roman citizen chorus moved with the same ‘conformism’ as the soldiers. However, in their two confrontations with Coriolanus, he beats them either verbally or physically. Again, the overall cohesion of the mob deepens the effects in the text: a disorganized mob that scatters is acting as itself, but a coherent unit that fails when confronting a lone man betrays itself and appears to be little more than a chimera of power. Coriolanus is the one with true power, and the chorus cannot match him.
Berkoff’s staging of the battles, as in *Agamemnon*, highlights the differences between what are, in both pieces, essentially two choruses. The combat in *Coriolanus* is not a spectacle of pointless suffering but a demonstration of strength and fraternity: the soldiers here are not victims of their leaders, but loyal followers bonding in combat. The Roman soldiers do not die repeatedly, nor do they turn in on themselves: there are no victims, only adherents to the martial virtue Coriolanus believes himself to exemplify.

In other words, there is no cost to following this military leader – there is no butchery, no waste of lives. The two kinds of unified movement depicted, that of the soldiers and that of the citizens, carry significantly different meanings. *Behind* Coriolanus, unity brings victory and honour. *In front of* Coriolanus, unity speaks of manipulation, pervasive fickleness, and ingratitude.

The fateful moments of this production no longer depict a Coriolanus who ‘cannot or will not master a political style appropriate to the modern world’, but a strong leader rejected by a public that cannot recognize their saviour when he appears to them. Of the New York production, Over wrote, ‘the audience felt an affinity with this Martius’, and Frank Rich claimed that ‘our sympathies are with him’.

Berkoff’s productions are less concerned with Coriolanus’s arrogance preventing him from adjusting to the required manoeuvring of representative politics than with the inability of the citizens to recognize their betters. Faced with the manipulating tribunes, who are played in Leeds as ‘the one weasel-like and quick to passion, the other driven by the icy ambition of the political climber’, and upon whom Berkoff shovels scorn in his journals, the chorus listens and obeys. Faced with Coriolanus, a man who has, after all, saved their city repeatedly, they simultaneously fracture and revolt.

**Race and Berkoff’s Choruses**

The weakness of this crowd takes on racial overtones given that the New York production was the first in which Berkoff worked with a markedly polyracial cast. With the same men playing the Roman citizens and the Roman soldiers, an uncomfortable scenario unfolds. The Roman crowd in this staging is an emblem of dysfunctional pluralism working in concert only to thwart a rightful ruler. As I have argued, their regimented movement here indicates weakness of will instead of strength of purpose, while the drilled movements of the soldiers demonstrate the creation of a ‘body’ bound to its ‘head’ – Coriolanus.

The racial politics of the production are far from clear – the same ensemble portrayed both choruses – but the presence of different races in the ensemble recasts Rome’s plight. It is not simply that Rome requires a form of government removed from the will of its people, but that a *polyracial* society functions best without political representation. This conclusion becomes more difficult to avoid when we acknowledge how Berkoff cast another role in the New York and the Leeds production (which was also polyracial): Coriolanus’s antagonist in battle, the leader of the Volscians, with whom he shares a kind of grudging respect, was a black actor (Keith David in New York, Colin McFarlane in Leeds and London). Both David and McFarlane are imposing figures with great vocal command, making them ‘natural’ choices for the role. And yet, Coriolanus is not only superior to Aufidius in battle, but their short-lived alliance dissolves when Coriolanus is persuaded to spare Rome and is soon murdered by his once-again enemy.

This reading surely contravenes Berkoff’s intentions for the production and I am not suggesting that Berkoff himself bears these feelings. However, as he does not address the issue of race in his writing on the productions of *Coriolanus*, his history of casting choices and the written record elsewhere must speak for themselves. To be sure, he writes warmly of his experiences working with African American casts in the United States, and his production of *Richard II* (1994), also at the Public Theatre in New York, cast a white Richard (Michael Stuhlbarg) against a black Bolingbroke (Andre Braugher). While this repeats the dynamic of an eponymous
white character opposed by a black antagonist, this play in no way replicates the emotional or political dynamics of Coriolanus – no one’s sympathies are with Aufidius, and Bolingbroke goes on to become Henry IV.

Nonetheless, Berkoff’s choices as to when to use mixed-race casts and when to use monoracial ones may raise concerns about his insensitivity to the role race plays in the dynamics of the cultures his plays depict. New York, Leeds, and London in the 1980s and 1990s were all strongly multicultural cities and thus his productions reflected their host cities’ racial compositions. Perhaps this is what Berkoff meant when he claimed: ‘Like most directors, I feed on myself for ideas. But the idea for the Chorus that is central to the play and the ensemble acting that resulted was influenced by New York street life.’

Given the marked similarities between the chorus in this production and in Agamemnon, it is hard to credit this observation other than as an indication of his choice to cast actors of more than one hue. The difficulty is that, in their depiction of a troubled Rome, these stagings of Coriolanus suggest that that city’s resistance to effective governance is a function of its heterogeneous population. The polyvocality of the crowd is matched by its polyracial composition, a concurrence that other productions might stage as a sign of the city’s strength. For Berkoff, however, the crowd’s many voices are coordinated into a simple opposition to Coriolanus, and their many races are not represented as a flexible multiplicity but as a hardened bloc.

Although the New York production was the first in which Berkoff had worked with a polyracial cast, it was not the first time he had worked with non-white actors. His Los Angeles production of Agamemnon featured an entirely African American cast, the only non-white, monoracial cast he has used in an English-speaking production. The production was part of the Olympic Arts Festival, associated with the summer Olympic Games. The Festival involved over 1,500 artists and 400 events, including thirty theatre companies from fourteen different countries.

While the Festival explicitly attempted to include work outside the mainstream, it was heavy with Western ‘classics’ whose adaptation by companies from different countries could stand as a testament to their universality; there were several productions of Shakespeare, as also of Athenian tragedy. Berkoff’s Agamemnon, produced by LA Theatre Works, was nonetheless an awkward choice: untethered from the rest of the trilogy of which it forms a part, the play ends with the authors of a double murder unpunished and the installation of a new tyrant. Even in the context of an Olympics boycotted by the Soviet bloc, this was strong stuff for a celebration of art ‘as an instrument of truth’.

To read Berkoff’s account of his casting decision, it appears that the context of athletic spectacle provided the basis for his decision to cast exclusively black actors. He claimed that he decided on an all-black cast because ‘American blacks were fitter, stronger, more physically alert . . . than their white compatriots’.

While his pages of praise for the cast are undoubtedly genuine, his perspective also partakes of the casual prejudice that purports to praise African Americans for athleticism while simultaneously obscuring their possession of qualities marked as ‘white’, such as intelligence and reason. And Berkoff knew it: ‘I am ready to plead guilty to any charges that may be laid, in that I was looking for athleticism, fervour, [and] community spirit for the Chorus and strong voices. They had all of these qualities in “spades” and it was one of the most enjoyable experiences of my directing life.’

Trying to Erase Race

In his typically provocative manner, Berkoff asserts a racist lens as if it was a compliment to the actors with whom he worked on the production. While he continued work with one of these actors, Roger Guenveur Smith, in the New York production of Coriolanus, this does little to dissipate the unsavoury depictions of racially marked societies struggling, and failing, to benefit their citizens. In the case of Agamemnon, where Berkoff had previously used an all-white cast, the impact is not easy to gauge. Given the frame of the
There is no doubting the paucity of fully realized roles for African American actors in 1980s Hollywood or indeed in United States theatre at the time, or that ‘playing blacks’ in 1980s Los Angeles predominantly meant fulfilling white fears of urban life. But by positioning himself as the only recourse these actors have for ‘classical’ acting, Berkoff re-stages a familiar narrative in which a lone white man is the only salvation for a benighted local black population. Even if we take Berkoff at his word that the cast was as entranced by the experience as he depicts them, this need hardly recommend that the best they can hope for is erasing blackness and being subsumed into a neutral soup that is ‘the heritage of every actor’ in order to play ‘Greek’.

Four Choruses, Two Governments

Over two decades of work, the bodily formations and trajectories of Berkoff’s choruses lead from a tragedy of the collective to a tragedy of an individual. Dictatorial rule in Agamemnon binds one chorus in senseless slaughter staged in lengthy sequences; it simultaneously fractures the citizen chorus in hopeless abjection during scenes of hesitant interrogation. In contrast, dictatorial rule in Coriolanus offers the sole salvation to the choruses, thrusting one into synchronized and efficient killing and another into synchronized and inefficient resistance. Here, unquestioned obedience results in glory and thoughtful deliberation has been banished from the citizens.

In both pieces there are two choruses, one martial and one civilian, and throughout all the productions the choruses move with rigidity, cohesion, and precision. And yet the significance of this single movement style changes radically over the productions. In Agamemnon, the martial chorus is locked into a death-struggle with itself while the Argive elders are unable to muster their unity to gain freedom from their unjust rulers. In Coriolanus, the martial chorus is bound for glory while the Roman citizens are condemned for opposing their rightful ruler. It appears, then, that while maintaining the
presentation of choral work, Berkoff’s productions undergo a startling political development: the dedication to developing an effective performing cohort no longer serves a democratic or even a republican vision of governance, but one that glorifies a militarized state whose existence can only survive under the rule of a despot unconcerned with his people. In light of the most negative descriptions of Berkoff in rehearsal, this suggests his own development from director of an ensemble, the London Theatre Group, to director for hire.76

Berkoff’s professed identification with the actor-managers Henry Irving, Edmund Kean, and Jean-Louis Barrault indicates that he may have come to envision himself as precisely the kind of autocrat exemplified by his Coriolanus: at home with like-minded followers and impatient with any feedback not to his liking. In his regular professions of admiration for ensemble work and the camaraderie of rehearsal, Berkoff has argued for the value of experimentation and using all the powers of the actor.77 But it must be admitted that his protestations of commitment to collective artistic endeavour begin to thin out as he ages, and in some of his paens to ensemble-driven work his references to ‘unity’ and ‘loyalty’ imply that he takes the greatest pleasure from a sense of being supported rather than challenged and surprised.

Robert Cross, in the only book-length treatment of Berkoff and his theatre, argues vigorously that the only actor Berkoff has ever wanted to see using all his power is Berkoff himself, and that Berkoff has since the late 1960s advocated an individualistic politics, his numerous and pungent criticisms of Thatcherite England notwithstanding.78

Notably, however, Cross avoids a movement analysis of Agamemnon and Coriolanus (as indeed of the chorus in any of Berkoff’s pieces). As I have argued here, just this kind of analysis offers a more complex understanding both of Berkoff’s politics as well as of the possibilities offered by these performances. His commitment to ensemble movement began a trajectory from protesting needless death to an apparent endorsement of militarized rule.

Precision and unity signify tragic strength in Agamemnon while in Coriolanus they signal weakness; in the former, the failure to resist their leader condemns the chorus while in the latter this resistance itself condemns them. ‘Ignore the mob,’ Clytemnestra tells Aegisthus after they take power: ‘they quake and quell / you and I are in power darling / we shall order things well.’79 Whether they are capable of doing so, the leaders in these productions remain untouched by their citizens, whose voices are silenced and whose bodies are ordered too well.

Notes and References

1. Berkoff restaged Coriolanus over a seven-year span. He first directed the play for the New York Public Theatre as part of their ‘Shakespeare Marathon’ season of 1988–89. Following the success of this production, he was invited to stage it again in Munich, where it premiered in 1991 to further acclaim. As he wrote in his journal of the Munich production, he was beginning to covet the central role for himself, and in 1995 he staged the production in Leeds with himself starring as Coriolanus; the production later moved to the Mermaid in London in 1996. See Steven Berkoff, Coriolanus in Deutschland (Oxford; London: Amber Lane Press, 1992), p. 22.

2. Berkoff’s first work on Aeschylus’ Agamemnon was presented as a student workshop at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in 1971. From this experience, he fashioned his own adaptation, working with a group of actors that included some former students from Webber Douglas and actors who had passed through a workshop audition. The first presentation was at a Manchester arts festival in 1973, followed by a run at the Roundhouse in London that same year. In 1976, another version was staged at the Greenwich Theatre, also in London. Berkoff directed the play two more times, in Israel (1979) and Los Angeles (1984); in all but these last two productions, Berkoff played the role of Agamemnon.


4. A monograph by Robert Cross and an essay by Fiona Macintosh are the two most notable exceptions to the general shunning of his work in academic contexts:


6. Cross, p. 112.

7. Steven Berkoff, Agamemnon; the Fall of the House of Usher (Charlbury, Oxon: Amber Lane Press, 1990), p. 38.


10. In his autobiography, Berkoff positions the origins of this element of his work in his training with Claude Chagrin and Jacques Lecoq. See Berkoff, Free Association, P. 53.

11. ‘Blood will have blood/ The high will fall / the ghosts of men who died for nothing / will walk by a ruined wall’: Berkoff, Agamemnon, p. 19.


19. Although marked by its proximity to the events it describes, Sandy Craig’s history of the ‘alternative’ British theatre movement during the 1960s and 1970s remains a useful resource for the origins and methods of these company models. See Sandy Craig, Dreams and Deconstruction: Theatre in Britain (Ambergate: Amber Lane Press, 1980).

20. A recent collection of essays addresses the resurgence of the Athenian dramatic form, and its attendant roles for the chorus, during this period. See Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley, ed., Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium.


27. Berkoff, Agamemnon, p. 24. The music was by Gordon Phillips. In the Greenwich Theatre production of 1976 the music was by Paul Burwell and David Troop.


30. From the production photographs, the Los Angeles production appears to have brought back the poles.


33. Hammond, p. 34.

34. Bierl, p. 292.

35. Berkoff, Agamemnon, p. 23.

36. Ibid., p. 31.

37. Ibid., p. 33.


40. Berkoff, Coriolanus in Deutschland, p. 42.


46. Berkoff, Coriolanus in Deutschland, p. 42.


52. Arnold, p. 196.

53. Ibid., p. 204.


55. Ibid. p. 313. See also p. 197, where Ripley quotes reviews of Henry Irving’s 1901 production that indicate a similar emphasis on the conflict between the upright Coriolanus and the ‘vicious rabble’. Although he never indicates having read about this production, Berkoff writes often of his identification with Irving as both an actor-manager and an outsize stage presence. See Berkoff, Free Association, p. 106, 134–5, 176, 207, 209.

56. Wills, p. 427.
57. Over, p. 367.
60. Rich.
62. While this may be fairly related to the subject of his plays – *East* and *Decadence* would lose the very cultural specificity that forms the target of their attacks – his Kafka and Poe adaptations did not require all-white casts. For the racial composition of *Agamemnon*, see below.
63. The cast of the Munich production was all white, but Berkoff was working from a company of actors presented to him by the theatre.
64. Berkoff and Morton, *The Theatre of Steven Berkoff*, p. 77. His direction of *On the Waterfront* (2008) also used a polyracial cast, the fourth occasion in his entire career.
65. Ibid., p. 115.
66. His Israeli *Agamemnon* and Japanese *Metamorphosis*, like his Munich *Coriolanus*, were cast with local (monoracial) actors provided to him by the producing company.
68. Fitzpatrick, p. 248.
69. Ibid., p. 248.
73. Ibid., p. 188, 198. The LA Theatre Works production was not on tour, but it was produced in the context of the international ‘marketplace’ of the festival.
74. Sullivan.
78. Cross, Chapters 3, 4, and *passim*. It is unfortunate that this sole book-length treatment of Berkoff appears dedicated to the simultaneously banal and overdeveloped thesis that Berkoff’s longing to gain mainstream acceptance results in his performing himself as a Thatcherite autocrat. For all the superb history Cross offers, his determination to prove Berkoff a closet Tory frustrated by his inability to convince broad audiences of his individual merits requires omitting analysis of a large part of Berkoff’s work, including his work with Shakespeare texts, in addition to ignoring his decades-long collaborations with numerous actors and designers. It also leads to such questionable conclusions as the astonishing claim that Berkoff’s white-face, obscenity-spewing, brawling, unabashedly patricidal and incestuous Oedipus, the Eddy of Greek, is ‘a classic yuppie’ (p. 171).