Report on ‘Dog-Tomb’, a site-specific performance written and directed by Zoe Harris-Wallis

On the 8th and 9th of July, myself and my team (made up on UCL students from all different subjects as well as UAL students and freelance artists) put on an experimental performance based on Greek tragedy at the Crypt Gallery in St Pancras Church, Euston. The piece was called ‘Dog-Tomb’ and was a site-specific performance that combined elements of performance art, spoken word and theatre to offer a re-telling of the story of the mythical Trojan queen, Hecuba.

The project was based on a piece of new writing, created by me, that took the form of a long poem which was inspired by the dramatic monologues of ancient tragedy and the narrative qualities of epic poetry. The ancient texts which I sought to combine and re-work were a mixture of these two genres - Euripides’ Hecuba and The Trojan Women and Ovid’s Metamorphoses. I was particularly interested in how in the *Hecuba* and the *Metamorphoses*, Hecuba either transforms or is prophesied to transform into a dog.

I wanted to explore how this is the final image we have of Hecuba in both texts. Such a final impression of the former Trojan queen seems to dismiss her character after she has transgressed the boundaries of womanhood when she violently blinds the former Trojan ally who killed her youngest son in return for Greek friendship. The suffering and injustices that have lead to such actions are suddenly eclipsed by her traversal into the non-human realm. This is further emphasised by the fact that in both ancient accounts, Hecuba will not receive a proper burial but will die as a dog either on land or on sea in an unmarked grave.

The money that was kindly granted by the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies was used to hire the venue where the performance took place - The Crypt Gallery. The gallery is a deconsecrated crypt in St Pancras Parish Church that has been left almost exactly as it was when it was still used as a crypt, with bare stone walls and even some of the old masonry. The setting was therefore very appropriate since the performance sought to give Hecuba a proper burial through re-telling her story from her perspective and by re-imagining her metamorphosis.

The porch of the Crypt was also modelled on the Erechtheion on the Athenian Acropolis and so boasts four monumental Caryatids. The architecture therefore felt appropriate for a staging of a performance based on Greek material but particularly on the story of Hecuba. Much like a Caryatid, Hecuba upholds a huge weight in her role as queen of Troy, mother to nineteen children and then the unspoken leader of the various captive Trojan women in the aftermath of the war. The architecture itself provided inspiration for my writing as I wanted to explore how the Caryatids and Hecuba could be re-imagined as women holding up a great burden and thinking about what might happen if they started to crumble beneath these unrealistic expectations. This image was also explored by Marika Tyler-Clark (@marikatylerclark\_art), a talented artist from the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, in her provoking painting, ‘Hecuba’, which was made for the performance and placed in the entrance of the gallery.

To enhance the importance of the space, the performance took place *en promenade* throughout the gallery which is structured by small rooms, alcoves and passageways. The piece started outside the gallery as the chorus emerged from the cool darkness of the Crypt into the July heat and surveyed their audience before ushering them into the space and marking the beginning of the story they were about to embark on together. The chorus thus played a vital role in leading both Hecuba and the audience around the space through non-contact gestures working as a link between the character Hecuba, the space and the audience. This gave the actors playing the chorus a challenging but stimulating task as they stepped outside the traditional role of the ancient chorus but in a way that still kept some its features such as speaking in unison and adding atmosphere to the piece. As Deepali Foster, who played one of the chorus members, said,

“Performing ‘Dog-Tomb’ at The Crypt Gallery was a phenomenal experience. The space was ideal for the script, contributing to an atmosphere of intensity. As well as it being an exciting and unusual environment for us actors to work in, thanks to its tombstones and winding passageways, the Crypt allowed the audience to be entirely immersed in the drama. Guiding the audience into the various enclosed spaces generated an intimacy between them and the performers, which would’ve been difficult to achieve to the same extent on a traditional stage. Along with the handmade costumes and spoken verse, the set and staging helped to create a multi-sensory, intriguing piece.”

I also took advantage of being able to use such an interesting venue by opening the Crypt during the day on Saturday 8th July for an exhibition. People who were unable to attend the performances were able to come in and experience the space and all the objects used for the set and the costumes that the various artists had worked so hard to create. I also stuck up sections from the script in the corresponding rooms where they were performed so visitors could read the text alongside looking at the objects. This was a great success and we also had many people attend who were just looking at the church and stumbled across out exhibition.

I am incredibly grateful to the SPHS for their grant, without which this project would not have been possible.