

Swallow Song

reviewed by Anna Banfi

“Every family sends out
its living men to war:
every family gets back
their ashes in a jar.

War is a changer of pure gold
reducing living men
into dry lamented dust
sent back from Troy again”

From *Swallow Song*: Aeschylus' Agamemnon, lines 433-444, adapted by Oliver Taplin.

These lines could not sound more timely to a contemporary audience's ears. In this turbulent, historical period, with the foolishness and presumption of exporting “democracy” to political systems considered a threat to the security of other countries, Aeschylus' words sound like a warning for every citizen who, today and always, cannot be oblivious to or detached from the political situation.

Aeschylus underlines the violence of the war – of every war – that takes boys and men from their houses, leaving behind wives and children who fear they will not see them coming back alive. The Greek theatre does not solve, but contains and performs the conflicts and the contradictions of the polis: the ancient Greek theatre was the place where the playwright and the audience found themselves discussing the present, dressing it with mythological stories.

Swallow Song was first performed at the J. Paul Getty Centre in Los Angeles in October 2004. The Onassis Programme for the Performance of Greek Drama at Oxford University, which was launched in the Spring 2006 with the world premiere of *The Seven Pomegranate Seeds*, produced *Swallow Song* at the Oxford Playhouse on November 17th and 18th 2006 and at the Cochrane Theatre, London on November 21st and 22nd 2006.

This production brings together the most talented principal actors in Greece – Lydia Koniordou, Martha Frintzila, George Stamos, Christos Loulis, Tanya Papadopoulou and Georgia Tsangaraki – with a chorus of eight emerging young British performers: Alex Beckett, Antony Eden, Rebecca Everett, Helena Johnson, Curtis Jordan, Francesca Loren, Kyl Messios and Julia Sandiford.

The first thing the audience sees is a white back-drop and a rectangular stage on which seemingly random objects have been scattered: umbrellas, pieces of paper and veils. Joining words and dance, the Greek actors alternate between the major roles. When not engaged in the main action, however, they do not leave the stage but are absorbed into the chorus which frames the scene with its bodily presence.

The performance includes translated verses from *Ion*, *Trojan Women*, *Iphigeneia among the Taurians* and *Iphigeneia at Aulis* by Euripides, *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi* by Aeschylus, *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, poetry by Sappho, Simonides, Pindar and Theognis, and fragments from Homer's *Iliad*.

These fragments have been translated by Oliver Taplin, Professor of Classical Literature at Oxford: his translation is precise, clear and, as the director and actress Lydia Koniordou said in the post-show platform after the 17th November performance in Oxford, it is fluent and does not create any gaps in the acting.

Through these verses from Greek epic, lyric and tragedy, Lydia Koniordou, long considered to be the finest classical Greek actress of her generation, can trace the different stages of the process of maturing, as the infant gradually becomes an adult and a conscious citizen.

Children are often involved in tragic plays bigger than themselves. They can't understand what is happening but still they find themselves a part of these events, carried away by their destructive current. This is the story of Astyanax, told in Euripides' *Trojan Women* and performed in *Swallow Song*: he is a war victim, a child too tiny to have done anything wrong, but the last symbol of the royal house that the Greeks wish to exterminate. The absurdity of

Astyanax's death is certainly the essence of the uselessness of wars. Telling this episode, Euripides seems to affirm that men who become blind with the thirst for power lose the ability to respect the limits imposed by the civil rules. When they overstep these rules, they return to an animal state.

At the beginning and at the end of the play, the Chorus sings "*Swallow Song*". This song has been sung from ancient times right up to the present day by boys and girls of Rhodes, Aegina and Corfu who in springtime go from house to house asking for wine, fruit and others gifts on behalf of the swallows. The *Swallow Song*, for Lydia Koniordou and her collaborators, also represents the inner wisdom and harmony of the child that is gradually covered and distorted in the process of becoming adult.

The choice of white for the colour of all elements on the stage, including the costumes, is perfect. White is the colour of childhood, light-heartedness and innocence. The conscience of a child is white, but before he grows up, it can be soiled. The hands stained with blood on the white sheet are the metaphor of a childhood forced into adulthood.

The music, one of the main elements in the performance, is played on the stage. The musicians follow the rhythm of the events performed on the stage very well and they manage to join the sounds with the stories told in the performance. The result is a perfect symphony between words, songs, music and dance. Sounds are sometimes delicate, gentle, like a brush that simply tries to delineate the profile of a landscape; at other times they become strong, pressing to underline the hopelessness caused by war and death.

The actors create paper boats at the beginning of the play and use them time after time during the performance: the ships are the symbol of the Greeks who, after the Iphigeneia's sacrifice, can sail to Troy. Iphigeneia, victim, betrothed to death, with a white veil that covers her head and trails across the stage, walks towards her fate. The chorus members place the paper boats on the veil which they gently agitate to symbolize the sea: she goes to Hades, the Greeks sail to Troy.

Navigation is also a metaphor for life: a child comes into the world and begins his life, like a sailor who sails in his boat. Neither knows where that journey will carry them, nor how the crossing will be. Certainly, there will be storms, from which a man should learn how to behave in the difficult situations during his life.

During the performance, some photographs are shown on a white sheet. They document the tragedies brought by war to mothers and children in modern Greece. Looking at these, the audience inevitably thinks about the images of victims of the wars shown on the TV every day; the sad eyes of a Greek child remind them of the hopeless eyes of an Arab or an African child, and all of the children who live in a country at war. The weeping of a Greek mother and wife is as strong as the weeping of an Afghani or Iraqi woman and they cause the same anger.

The cruelty of war is underlined also by exhibition of photographs of lost people: men, women and children who have disappeared during this and every war. The chorus members fix the photos to white boards, transforming their screams into hopeless black words written on the wall. Relatives' words and weeping remain the only way to declare the violence and the long impact of war.

In conclusion, Greek poetry – especially tragedy – offers possibilities to reflect on the contemporary international situation and its wars and suffering. Ancient Greek literature has an irresistible power, as strong as the need of human nature to question itself. The answers to the questions can be different, depending on the age in which they arise and on the conditions in which people live. However, trying to discuss and to find answers is a sign that the world has not gone completely mad. Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were Athenian citizens and, as citizens, they spoke in front of the polis about contemporary Greek policy. They related their opinions about it through mythological stories, but the real force of their drama was actually to drive the audience to think about political and social issues afresh whatever their individual opinions were.

Swallow Song is an excellent example of drama that speaks about real-life tragedies that have always destroyed people and countries, and will continue to do so. Because of the actions of adults, children are always the silent, innocent, everyday victims. On the stage as in real life, the scream full of horror needs a willing and attentive audience to give them voice.