

Review of Royal Shakespeare Company's Hecuba

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The Royal Shakespeare Company's powerful, if uneven, production of Euripides' *Hecuba* starring Vanessa Redgrave was specifically retooled for its summer 2005 American tour through Washington, DC and New York City; judging from the audience's (gasping) reaction to Hecuba at her nastiest, the production succeeded in stirring us Americans to pity, fear, and (of course) a standing ovation. Needless to say, this is hardly feel-good summer fare: the play partakes liberally of assault, infanticide, deoculation and other tricks of the tragic trade while exploring the effects of the Trojan war's aftermath on its war-slaves. Tony Harrison's quirky, rhythmic translation propels the evening towards its gory dénouement, and Redgrave's star power is considerable. But one never shakes off the feeling that underneath this reverent production was a darker and more visceral Hecuba waiting to burst out. Only towards the end does this Hecuba catch fire.

The production, as physically designed by Es Devlin, starts out auspiciously. The curtain may rise on Polydorus' ghost, but he hardly commands the scene: instead, the audience's eyes remain glued to rows upon rows of American military tents - bivouacs from the U.S.A. on strange, Trojan shores. Harrison transfers this metaphor to the text itself, as Greeks are often referred to as "coalition forces" and the Trojans derided as "terrorists." In some senses, Harrison's references to the current conflict are both heavy-handed and yet not enough: if Hecuba is to stand as a parable of American's failure to "civilize" the east through conflict, why not then go whole hog, and bring in the tanks, the body bags, the grenades, the President? As it is, the tableau, so striking in its initial moments, becomes static and dull as the play progresses; worse yet, the physical arrangement of these tents pens in the actors, restricting the space for play. The Kennedy Center's mammoth Eisenhower Theatre could have accommodated a production with (literally) more depth: most of the action, however, takes place near the apron of the stage, in a straight line. Devlin's imposing mountain of tents thus has the inadvertent effect, I think, of making the human drama seem flat and small.

The production belongs firmly to the "stand-and-declaim" school of classical acting, and for all of the innovations of the design team, the direction (not credited but presumably by Harrison) is distinctly old-fashioned and focused on the text. This is not a criticism, per se, but it does mean that language is the thing, and stage business only an afterthought. Some grasp the language better than others. Redgrave, for instance, boasts a superb technical command of the stage: every word and gesture crisp and assured. The same cannot be said, however, of Lydia Leonard's Polyxena, in a curiously muted performance. Alan Dobie's Talthybius manages the heft of his great messenger speech, even if he does seem too old for the part of disillusioned envoy. Darell D'Silva plays Odysseus with a strange sort of American swagger (again, it's a failure of the production to make this hint cohesive with the whole); D'Silva does better, however, as the benighted Polymestor.

For most performances of Greek tragedy, the chorus is its Achilles's heel. In this *Hecuba*, however, it is undeniably the star. Mick Sands' pre-recorded and vaguely new-age accompaniment gives the 11-member female chorus full rein to sing full throttle, and it is a knockout performance, full of angst and beauty and sorrow. Scored for a variety of winds, synthesized sounds, and especially a drumbeat, Sands's music emphasizes the percussive nature of Harris' translation. In its modalities, however, the score evokes the tonal world of Middle Eastern music, without the clichéd wailing that has afflicted recent "classical scores" (such as in the films *Troy* and *Alexander*). For most of the hymns, the chorus sings lines individually, then collectively, providing a sense of climax and cohesion. Though there is no choreography as such, the chorus does arrange itself into a variety of constellations during these songs, providing some visual interest (this may be a glance towards Cacoyannis' similar use of the chorus in his filmed *Trojan Women*, a play with a great deal of thematic kinship with *Hecuba*). Throughout the evening, this chorus slowly gels as the most powerful presence on stage, demonstrating an intriguing facet of Euripides' astounding text: the title notwithstanding, the chorus is the most important part of this play. Though nominally a Trojan woman, Hecuba is also entitled, imperious, and finally murderous: she becomes a counterweight to the chorus, and as amoral in her way as the Greek captors. Pulled between pity for Polymestor and awe for Hecuba, the chorus finds itself the locus of ethical tension throughout the play's 100 minutes.

The play certainly picks up steam towards the end, and the performance's slow start gives way to a truly chilling climax. When Redgrave ends the evening howling like the bitch she will soon become, a shiver, sincere and cold, runs through the audience. It's a shame, however, that the rest of this *Hecuba* doesn't have (like Hecuba herself!) more bite.



Plate 1 Vernessa Redgrave as Hecuba
(Photographed by Manuel Harlan, Copyright RSC)