

Euripides' *Orestes* adapted by Helen Edmundson

reviewed by Amanda Wrigley

Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, University of Oxford
Director: Nancy Meckler, Tricycle Theatre, Kilburn, 7th November – 2nd December 2006

The London performances of this touring production of *Orestes*, staged by Shared Experience under the direction of Nancy Meckler, took place in Kilburn's intimate Tricycle Theatre. The site of the drama is Clytemnestra's bedroom, dominated by its bed, and to which an enormous mirrored door, formally decorated with golden shoes, added grandeur. A 'dressing up' box of golden clothes and accessories – into which the young woman Electra delves greedily as if she were the cherished little girl she tells us she never was – completes the set (design by Niki Turner). The entrance of the statuesque Helen (Clara Onyemere), made up in white evening dress, serves to emphasize the squalor of the blood-stained siblings in what was, time past, their parents' bedroom. The bodies of Electra (Mairead McKinley) and Orestes (Alex Robertson), half-clad but covered from head to toe in dried blood from the murder of their mother and her lover, blend imperceptibly into the dirty and ragged sheets of the exhausted bed – as if they were newly born from it, emerging from their mother's womb, or from messy love-making.

The key strength of this excellent production lay in the clarity with which individual psychological histories and their continuing – and sometimes devastating – impact on motivations and behaviours were carefully delineated and maintained throughout the drama. These remained powerfully distinct even at those moments when they collided and intersected disastrously, culminating in moments of murder or incestuous love. At such points the stage was electric with the complex weight of historic pain and current desire, and the atmosphere heightened by Peter Salem's scorching score. Strong and well-judged character development and acting was not confined to the main roles; in fact, every character was drawn with a depth and performed with a power that enriched the whole of the play.

There is no plurality of chorus in this production: the single figure of the Slave stands as sole witness and commentary on the action. The Slave (Claire Prempeh), whose own children were taken from her when she was captured, brings nothing but love for Helen's babe-in-arms, Hermione, for whom she is obliged to care. Acted with a grace and gravitas that belies the smallness of the part, this figure offers a powerful counterpoint to the other more aggressive responses to the experience of violence and hurt which are the focus of the play. Mention must be made of the innumerable 'mannequin' statues, lit in red, that flank the three walls of the stage. The presence of these 'others' standing faceless and motionless is felt most keenly at the startling close of the play when Orestes stands, crazed, on the roof of the burning palace (represented by the vast shoe-covered door turned onto the horizontal axis) about to throw the baby to her death. In this version there is no Apollo to intervene at this point; only the golden light shining full onto the figure of Orestes suggests the conviction of his belief in the rightness of his action, a belief which is clearly not shared by the horrified figures of Electra and Menelaos (Tim Chipping).

There was much in this production that would aggravate those who would want their Euripides more purely translated and staged: as the adaptor Helen Edmundson admits in her programme essay, she has 'played fast and loose...with the Euripidean version of the story', for example, cutting the role of Pylades, better to explore the extremities of the bond between Electra and Orestes. 'In short, I have followed my instincts. I have kept what is useful to me and lost what is not in the hope of creating a drama which can speak freely, freshly and vitally to audiences today'. For me, her hope was realised, with the still-beating heart of the drama freshly served up on stage.

There is such potential for overkill in *Orestes*, however it is adapted: the catalogue of family horror stories, Orestes' feverish madness and, in this version, the slide into incest and the killing of the baby Hermione. But this production lays fully bare the extremities of this horror, exploring its motivations and its impact, and taking the audience to the boundary of what it will accept – but never once crossing it. The production was meaty and thrill-seeking, but at the same time measured and prompting reflection. Are some human beings inherently evil – as Helen accuses Electra of being – or are they damaged individuals dangerously cast adrift from social norms? As if we need reminding in these troubled times, this adaptation hammers home the message that both physical and emotional violence breeds yet more violence – whether in international wars or in the home.

Note

This is a review of the 4pm performance on Saturday 25 November 2006 at the Tricycle Theatre, London. The touring production had also played in Dublin, Liverpool, and Oxford (amongst other places). Images, a video clip, and an interview with the director are available from the company's website at www.sharedexperience.org.uk.