

Sophocles's *Electra* and the Power of Words

Reviewed by James Svendsen
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Sophocles's *Electra* is an intense exploration of the Sophoclean hero (described so well by Bernard Knox in *The Heroic Temper*) and an investigation of common Greek themes such as *kommos* (lament), *philia* (friendship, mutual respect, familial love) and *dike* (vendetta justice). Controversy still rages over how, if at all, Electra changes, how the lyrical first half relates to the intrigue and action of the second half and with what closure the play ends. These questions were faced squarely by the University of Minnesota's BFA acting program during the winter of 2007 under the able direction of Sandra Shotwell in the Kilburn Arena Theater on the University of Minnesota campus.

Ancient Greek theatre is intended for large amphitheatres with masked actors, larger than life characters and emotions, and cosmic implications. One challenge of this particular production was the Arena Theatre itself, a small, circular theater in the round with a very small stage. The space engendered an intimate (no masks were used) production where the audience felt close – literally and figuratively – to the characters and action and could see every nuanced gesture and hear every phoneme. The three exits through the audience led to three specific geographic areas important to the action of the play: the palace at Mycenae; Phocis, the place of Orestes's exile; and the tomb of Agamemnon.

The production values of the University of Minnesota *Electra* were consciously minimalist with no set design – only the empty space to fill with actors – and no lighting effects. Costumes were designed by Kalere Payton and consisted of long, belted tunics worn by both actors and Chorus. The simple, shapeless tunics enabled male actors to participate in the large, female Chorus of eighteen who play a crucial role in the production. The costumes of Chrysothemis, Electra's sister, and the queen Clytemnestra were bright and elegant with collars, belts and gold and contrasted strongly with the black costumes of Electra, Orestes and Pylades. The sparseness of set, lighting and costumes focused attention on the actors themselves, their cries and shrieks of grief and pain and their words of anger, passion and deceit.

The acting script used by the University of Minnesota production was based on the recent translation of Sophocles's *Electra* by Anne Carson, noted first and foremost for her poetic and evocative Bittersweet Eros. Carson's translation, like the production itself, is spare and lean with short poetic lines, Anglo-Saxon in its diction, and successful in capturing both the rhythm and structure of the long set speeches and the speed and counterpunch of the stichomythia. Perhaps the defining characteristic of the translation is its use of the ancient Greek interjections (*oimoi*, *phew*, *io* etc.) of grief and pain, which occur (as in Sophocles's *Philoctetes*) with great frequency. Another challenge facing the American actors is precisely the discovery of value in pure sound and in Greek convention to express overwhelming emotions for which there are no words. In the 'talk back' after the show actors discussed the discoveries made in rehearsal, the effects of releasing of sound in inarticulate cries, and the process of making culturally "other" sounds and words personal, honest and focused.

Another defining choice of the production was its use of two Electras rather than one. The entire production was intended as a 'work in process' and as a key part of the overall Actor Training Program. Actors did not audition for roles but roles were distributed to actors on the basis of need and challenge. For the first half of the play Electra was played by Whitney Hudson, a full figured Electra with a milky white complexion and the voice of a diva with a range of octaves. For me she fully realised the lyrical Electra so prominent in the first scenes of Sophocles's play, which surprisingly includes a monody by Electra as part of the prologue. Hudson spoke part of the monody but with strained and distorted vowels and diphthongs which resulted in a rhythmic "patter song" both disturbing and moving. Hudson provided a study in grief both Mediterranean and archetypal, uttering the Greek conventional sounds of grief and pain, utilising the conventional gestures of grief (repeated beating of chest and head, ripping of clothing and covering of face) and falling to the earth/stage in her attempt to reach her dead father. After the centrepiece of the play, the Tutor's narration of Orestes's death, Whitney Hudson's Electra disappears into the surrounding Chorus while Kate Nelson's Electra agonisingly slithers to the centre of the stage to become Electra. Though costumed similarly in a black tunic, Kate Nelson is slim, boyish and angular with a deep, penetrating voice and a darker complexion. Thus the production made a strong choice regarding the character of Electra, who radically changes physically, vocally and emotionally for the second half of the play. She does leave the lyrical, 'feminine' world of lament and participates actively in the murders of both Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus.

The other characters were etched briefly but memorably with Chrysothemis and Clytemnestra foils for Electra. Courtney Roche was visually and vocally an effective counterpoint to Electra's passion and obsessions, portraying a 'normal' Greek female voicing

normal feminine concerns and sincerely trying to persuade her sister of the futility of her actions. Duncan Frost's Tutor was affably devious in his plotting and persuasive in his false Messenger speech, seizing the middle of the stage and involving the entire audience in his lurid story of violence and death. Perhaps the most idiosyncratic portrayal was Nikki Rodenberg's Clytemnestra, an over-the-top portrayal with shrieks, hands constantly in motion and voice distorted and shaking. Hugh Kennedy's ghostly Orestes, onstage only briefly at the beginning and end of the play, is dark and gaunt, a shadow of an Orestes, and acts quickly and decisively.

Director Sandra Shotwell loves Greek tragedy for its chorus and prefers to work with a large chorus as she does here. Partly, of course, the Greek convention gives actors the opportunity to work as a unified ensemble and also presents male actors with the challenge of crossing genders. Vocally this chorus was strong and articulate with the male voices adding substance, strength and nuance. But the words and story remained clear and the emotional connection to Electra portrayed with consistency and clarity. Critics comment frequently on the value of a favouring chorus, but I have never felt the sympathy, commitment and connection of Greek chorus with a protagonist as I did in this production. Shotwell's staging often placed the chorus in a large circle (or concentric circles) facing inward and totally focused on Electra. Thus the audience viewed Electra and her actions through the eyes and words of the chorus. A common 'blocking' strategy was the centripetal movement of an actor (the "birth" of the second Electra, the Tutor's messenger speech, Clytemnestra's defence etc.) toward centre stage with other actors, chorus and audience encircling the actor.

As so often noted in the handbooks, Greek tragedy is highly musical and perhaps more akin to opera than to modern theatre. Anne Carson's translation easily lends itself to music, and there was music –or recitative very close to music- in the University of Minnesota production wherever there was music in the original Greek performance. I have already discussed Electra's initial monody and the attempt to render the Greek *kommos* (antiphonal lament) portraying emotions and feelings stronger and more powerful than words and iambic lines can delineate. The three *stasima* (choral odes) by the chorus were also set to music, a cappella songs composed and sung by members of the company in rehearsal. In the 'talk back' members of the chorus discussed the trials and tribulations of creating choral songs, especially three choral odes so different in purpose and sentiment. The result was three choral songs more rhythmic than melodic, reminiscent of modern musicals than ancient Greece, but clearly articulated, emotionally grounded, and totally effective in moving forward the story.

Director Sandra Shotwell's *Electra* has an integrity in its total focus on the power of Sophocles's words. "Words, words, words, they're all we have to go on," maintains Tom Stoppard. No special effects of lighting, set design or costume distract from Anne Carson's clean and speakable acting script. This spare and swift (90 minutes with no break) production focuses directly on the characters' verbal power to invoke and commemorate the dead, to communicate with the living, to deceive through half-truths and outright lies and to persuade through arguments and appeals. The University of Minnesota production celebrates the power of myth and theatre in a manner both quintessentially Greek and at the same time timeless.

Note:

Sophocles, *Electra*
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Directed by Sandra Shotwell
Produced by the University of Minnesota Actor Training Program

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