

## ***The Women of Troy***

Sydney Theatre Company (premiered Wharf 1 Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company on 20th September 2008; opened in the Merlyn Theatre, CUB Malthouse, Melbourne on 8th November 2008).

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‘There is nothing one man will not do to another.’

- Carolyn Forché.

Telephone rings. Another gunshot. Another body slumps. That seam of blood (or is it oil?) crawls viscous down the wall. Shock numbs. Hecuba tapes her own daughters into packing crates: Cassandra, raped and vomiting, bloodstained underwear tangling round her ankles; Andromache, heavily pregnant; and Helen herself, black-gloved hands still fluttering between the slats, sealed up and silenced, no winner after all, just another victim, exposed as the iconic used-up tool of circumstance. Melita Jurisic plays all three roles in uncanny, delirious succession; Robyn Nevin, the *grande dame* of Australian theatre, play Hecuba. In Alice Babidge’s set, dozens of old lockers and empty shelves rear up behind them, reconstructing the walls of Troy from the relics of a gutted school. History seeps blood.

This is not Euripides’ *Troïades*. It is Barrie Kosky’s *The Women of Troy*, the harrowing adaptation devised by Kosky and collaborator Tom Wright for the Sydney Theatre Co in November 2008. The play has been brutally treated – scenes hacked off, odes wrenched out, whole characters silenced, thoroughly mutilated – in order to strip a respectable, canonical text down to its bare raw bones. A considerable proportion of the verbal lament that comprises Euripides’ *Troïades* has been rendered visually or viscerally, inscribed on the wounded bodies of the chorus or smeared across the harshly lit set. Often, the text is translated not into English but into music and soundscape. Linguistic breakdown generates consummate theatricality. Precious little communication is possible here. Not Cassandra’s garbled gabbling, not the Chorus’ operatic Babel, not the silent contempt of the guards offer any possibility of reconciliation. Dialogue has been supplanted by nightmarish images: a complacent, octogenarian Menelaus (Arthur Dignam) tossing breadcrumbs from a wheelchair, Astyanax’s blood-drenched legs dangling pathetically out of a cardboard box.

Unfortunately, much of Euripides’ subtlety has also collapsed. Instead of a psychological study in the grim and intricate facets of post-war survival, Kosky presents a blinding vision of pure twenty-first century atrocity. These Trojan women have no stain of moral ambiguity to trouble their abject condition, and their Greek captors have no taint of humanity. Bruised and abused, the women huddle helplessly in their concentration camp while faceless guards stroll past en route to commit another routine torture. The message of Kosky’s production becomes explicit, but also somewhat simplistic as not only the text but the audience is battered into submission. This is not a play that allows you to think. It is a play that makes you suffer.

Which is precisely the point. The discomfort Kosky induces in his spectators is the most powerful aspect of this production. It forces you to occupy an uneasy interface between voyeurism and bearing witness. Visual references to Abu Ghraib – Hecuba’s hood, the wires trailing from the chorus’ wrists, the guard recording torture on his mobile phone – clearly identify *The Women of Troy* as an indictment of recent Western (post-) war-crimes. Whether reproducing such images in a theatrical performance represents legitimate referencing or exploitation is a contentious issue, and leads back to this question of the audience’s position. How complicit are you in inflicting (simulated) pain? Why are you watching this unfold? *Still* watching? Powerless to intervene, should you enjoy the right exercised by a number of patrons and simply walk out, claiming that you shouldn’t have to be involved? Or do you keep watching, implicated in responsibility for all the pain you can’t alleviate? Sympathy paralyses. Spectatorship insulates and isolates. Australia’s middle-class theatre-going public are confronted by the callous disregard for proximate human suffering which is the true, bureaucratically sanctioned face of evil. Survivors’ guilt is thus provocatively displaced from Euripides’ characters onto Kosky’s audience.

As well as interrogating our relationship to current events, Kosky’s production interrogates our relationship to the classical past and the (ab)use of classical texts. Had Euripidean lyricism been retained, the play might have dutifully and respectfully replicated the form of its source-text. But it could not have achieved the jarring, controversial bite that came from violating this same form. *Troïades* the text, like Troy the city, is smashed and lost, at least within the scheme of Kosky’s production. Onstage appears the fallout, the afterburn, the relics. Euripides’ Hecuba herself realises that future fame – another means of survival – is predicated on

present suffering, and that Troy's annihilation guarantees its tragic longevity. In the same way, Kosky's dismemberment of the *The Women of Troy* guarantees their vital theatrical presence.

This play functions neither as entertainment nor as antiquarianism. Instead, it coerces canonical text into serving the needs of a contemporary society aenaesthetised by hand-wringing hypocrisy. But despite its sensational delivery, the despair articulated so eloquently by Kosky's staging tends to evaporate somewhat whenever the spoken text surfaces. What ultimately results is a struggle, rather than a synthesis between material and style. Kosky does win, in the end, but not without causing some serious collateral damage along the way.