

Euripides' MEDEA

In a new translation by John Harrison

presented by the Foursight Theatre Company

at the Drama Studio, Cambridge

The afternoon before I went to the Foursight Theatre Company's production of *Medea* I decided to read the play again. I've taught it for a number of years to Cambridge undergraduates as part of their Tragedy course. They use, in the main, Grene and Lattimore's translation in the Chicago edition, which is recommended by the English Faculty. So that's what I read.

After years of maintaining that this is a wonderful play, I felt differently at the end of the afternoon. When I didn't have to persuade undergraduates of its merits, I was far from convinced of them myself. There were four main problems: the figure of Medea, the men who surround her, and Chorus and the Messenger. But all these problems were compounded, if not created, by the translation, reputable as it undoubtedly is.

In drama it is not enough to have a reputable translation. The words must be transparent, a window through which the audience sees and experiences the emotions of those who speak. As I closed my book, I wished I wasn't going to the play. I thought, this is a frightful play, I can't imagine how anyone can take it seriously. How on earth did I persuade the students to swallow it, let alone swallow it myself?

When I left the Drama Studio theatre at about half-past ten, I was convinced that I had seen not only one of the greatest plays that had ever been written, but incomparably the best performance of Greek drama that I have ever seen. Why the transformation? In the first place it was wonderfully directed and acted, and in the second, the translation removed one's sense that this was not the original language of the play (as one also feels, for example, with Elisaveta Fen's translations of Chekhov). John Harrison has found a flexible, easy, idiomatic, unpretentious idiom, which, instead of the self-conscious pastiche poetry of the Grene and Lattimore translation, depends for its impact on authentic modern English. The poetry is not

lost, but one never thinks: 'Ah yes, lovely poetry'. I remember the cellist Paul Tortelier once remarking, after a rather saccharine performance of the Fauré Elegy: 'Beuootiful playing. Me, I do not much care for beuootiful playing. I préfère CARACTÈRE!!!' Harrison's translation allowed the actors to express *caractère* and if there is beauty, it is the more magical because it steals on one unawares.

The effect of Harrison's translation on the figure of Medea was alchemical, enabling the actress, Naomi Cooke, to realise the awesome challenge of the part. Medea demands to be played across a gamut of emotions stretching from pathetic domestic figure deserted by her man, subject to both pity and veiled contempt, to demonic sorceress and murderer, a lodestar for fear and fascination, especially from men. Cooke encompassed an extraordinary vocal range matched by virtuoso facial expressiveness, particularly in the eyes, which moved from dead despair to devilish glitter with astounding velocity. When one reads the play in the Chicago translation one discredits this lightning veering between different *personae*. In Harrison's translation, the actress had a medium which allowed her to inhabit and project the continual devastating flux of Medea's dual, or even multiple, nature.

It was enthralling to see in turn how each of the men -- the Tutor, Aegeus, Creon (all brilliantly portrayed by Derek Froom, with such skilful distinctions of voice and appearance that one could hardly recognise that it was the same person) -- and of course Jason, Golden fleece hero who dumps his woman once she's served his career and care interests, flaunted their independence even as the magnet's point drew them irrevocably into its orbit. The director had not shirked the physicality of the play which must have been a part of its original performance, but which is often ignored in the modern theatre so that characters stand around mouthing out their translated platitudes while the audience gapes somnolently at what the Greeks apparently found riveting. Jason's (Patrick Morris) relation with Medea was in this production physically quite violent, which contrasted with Morris's projection of a man of some gentleness. The actor's display of male caddishness, all the more convincing for being beautifully understated, conveyed that somewhere in there was a likeable man, who had fallen unwittingly into deep waters and was struggling for air. At one point he came in just slightly

the worse for drink, a condition which many actors overplay, and Medea manipulated him as though she had turned a searchlight on a hapless rabbit enjoying an evening feed. One's loathing of Jason was mitigated by fellow-feeling; there but for the grace of God go I, an emotion only possible if the words he speaks are words we would have spoken ourselves.

Finally the Chorus. Oh dear, the Chorus. One is reminded of F.L. Lucas's brilliant little parody of Greek drama: 'I go with speed and heels'. There was no speed and heels here. The Chorus's speeches, played by three women (Lisa Harrison, Frances Land and Ria Knowles), were chanted and sung, sometimes in unison but more often in a gripping counterpoint in which the original Greek text overlaid the translation. With arresting rhythmic movements the effect was electrifying, not least because one heard enough without hearing absolutely everything, and a terrific pace was maintained. All the theatrical lassitude of the Chorus's comments on this and that was eliminated. Instead, here were compelling voices from which the solo actors seemed to emerge in a natural manner, as they were supposed to have done in the original Greek theatre. It was as if Euripides and his translator were themselves locked into dialogue and became performers in their own play.

The Greeks never played out violent scenes on stage. Shakespeare doesn't tell us the little princes were murdered in the Tower, he shows it. In *Medea* the children are murdered off-stage, but the compelling life-size puppets used by the Foursight Theatre Company became part of a pathetic and gruesome dumb-show which had an impact comparable to Shakespeare's scene in *Richard III*.

The convention of the Messenger presents another dilemma: a very long speech which risks becoming ludicrously oratical at a moment in the theatre when a modern audience expects action. Jill Douse (who had already given a convincing performance as Medea's Nurse) not only spoke the lines, she mimed the princess flattered by Medea's wedding gift, and seduced into flaunting her triumph over the sorceress before the poison eats into her flesh. When one reads the play it's easy not to notice that the convention of the Messenger allows Medea to be audience to her own cruelty; the theatre audience witnesses Medea's emotions

which become strangely and terrifyingly their own. Are we too glad as well as horrified that that bride got her come-uppance? And if so, what have we become?

I once wrote an essay about laughing in the wrong place in the theatre, in which I quoted various Chorus lines from Greek plays. But at this production I wasn't laughing. No, I was crying, and so were a lot of other people.

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Aeschylus' AGAMEMNON

in a new translation by Philip de May

presented by Foursight Theatre Company

Foursight's productions of Greek plays are becoming distinctive for a thoughtful approach that takes the audience into the play without gimmicks and without coercion of their response. This was a production in which the details of set and sound design, staging, movement and words worked together to create a world that was grounded in that of the spectators and yet also took them outside their own experience and across time and place.

As might be expected from a company dedicated to exploring the perspectives of the marginalised and oppressed, Aeschylus' play was refocused to bring out Clytaemnestra's situation as the betrayed wife and bereaved mother set on revenge on her husband. This was communicated partly by cutting out the Aegisthus strand but primarily by including Iphigeneia as a player. To do this is now bound to involve metatheatrical allusions, notably to Mnouchkine's approach in which *Iphigeneia in Aulis* was staged as a prelude to *Les Atrides* (DB number) and to Katie Mitchell's *The Home Guard* (DB number), in which the ghost of Iphigeneia silently viewed the proceedings from a balcony until she followed her father into the house and then huddled with his corpse in the bath. Foursight presented Iphigeneia as a puppet with long blond hair and wearing a saffron robe. This signalled the way in which she was treated as a sacrificial object by the Greeks at Aulis and yet reminded the audience that her voice and movement was also being manipulated in order to emphasise a certain interpretation of the play. Here, she was also a mover and commentator on the action, with her Nurse holding her and vocalising the opening Watchman's speech. The physical re-enactment of her sacrifice shocked the audience and the effect was compounded when the purple shroud in which her body was wrapped was unwound to make the floor covering over which Agamemnon walked into the house. The audience waited with bated breath for him to tread on her body. He did not and the audience's deferred expectations were jolted into awareness that he was actually treading on photographs of suffering children (another allusion perhaps to the Mitchell production in which the blood-stained dresses of little girls formed the 'carpet' under his feet).

Cassandra, too, was presented through a puppet, larger than Iphigeneia but smaller than lifesize, a black child-woman in brightly coloured costume ([click for images](#)). She shook as she sang of what would happen and yet appeared to swim and leap over the purple 'sea' of the carpet and into the house and her death. The figure of the puppet had a mask like quality, analogous to the conventions of ancient theatre. This, combined with the voice of the actress who emerged from under the puppeteer's veil as the speaking Cassandra, signalled the combination of object/victim and prophesying subject represented in Aeschylus' play.

The traverse staging ensured that the opposition of the 'war' and 'home' design zones at either end of the acting space framed the movement as well as the ideas. The open space between provided a place of encounter and conflict between war and home. It allowed the visual and physical impact of the model eagles which were made by the Chorus to swoop down on the bloodied hare as the Chorus recounted the simile in which Aeschylus likened the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus to birds of prey. The traverse space also allowed the movement of the Chorus to take place in 'the

space between' the polarised extremities. This was especially effective given the diversity of gender, ethnicity and social status represented in the Chorus. It allowed space for the candle-lit rituals and laments and for the integration of movement and song. It was a pity that the shape of the Newhampton Arts Studio meant that the traverse was long and narrow and could not allow the audience to visualise movement on the diagonal.

The different languages used are an index of the tendency towards multi-lingualism in productions of Greek drama. Here, they reflected the way in which the Chorus represented not the Elders of Argos but all those left behind by the war or caught up in its aftermath. Rob Swinton's Chorus figure combined the bemedalled Establishment Elder's standard English with the religious imperative of Calchas as the sacrifice of Iphigeneia was ordered. The diversity of languages used not only mapped the cultural diversity of the Chorus members but also contextualised rituals which differed from the politicised religion of Calchas. The effect was to put the audience in the place of those caught up in something which was both familiar and strange, a war and its aftermath in which they sometimes directly understood the words and sometimes watched as cultural strangers, sometimes grasping meaning communicated through movement and gesture rather than words. Sanjay Shelat and Taylan Halici, who also played the Herald, were outstanding in their integration of voice, song and movement.

Video was used on the screen at the 'war' end of the acting space to project close-ups of Clytaemnestra's emotions and to introduce images of suffering and revenge, including the coming together of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra in the bath as he was murdered. The images suggested an erotic dimension to their relationship and related quizzically to Naomi Cooke's deeply ironised exploration of the layers of Clytaemnestra's emotions.

Foursight's ensemble work is sensitive and nuanced. The direction gives the actors and the audience time for reflection and transformation. The company's 'take' on the play and the concentration on Clytaemnestra's grievance will be challenged by some but as a production this was intelligent, finely balanced and thought-provoking. Their production of *Hecuba* (due in autumn 2004) will be eagerly awaited.

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Foursight Theatre's production of

Aeschylus' Agamemnon

Agamemnon is an Everest for theatre people to conquer. The density and cragginess of the verse, not least in the long choral odes, present huge difficulties. Foursight's was a most stimulating and engrossing production. The 'experimental' label allowed them to make discreet, sensitive cuts and to introduce bold theatrical devices which in most cases opened up the play's meaning and power brilliantly.

The long, opening ode, in which the Chorus explore the background to the story, contains information vital for the audience's understanding. The production tackled the difficulties head-on. The text was delivered with admirable clarity. Differentiated characters within the multi-racial Chorus made them a credible body of citizens, with recognisable points of view and fears, not a disembodied voice. The use of puppets brought the omens of the eagles devouring the hare and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia vividly to life; and rituals - as at the return home of the Herald - and some beautiful singing added to the emotional power of significant moments. The puppets representing Cassandra and the spirit of Iphigeneia were inspired ideas, and beautifully handled.

An air of foreboding hung over the whole play, as it should. The traverse staging worked well, suggesting distance and different locations and heightening the significance and drama of meetings, not least that of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. One altogether remarkable aspect of the production was the way in which the characters, whose words may seem monumentally declamatory on the page, interacted with one another in a totally credible way.

Clytemnestra's edgy relation with the Chorus was particularly well portrayed, her efforts to impose on them never convincing. She conveyed well the weight of resentment she feels at her daughter's murder, but - my only criticism - the audience, unlike the Chorus, could not know the full extent of her duplicity. Given the time at the company's disposal the final scene of the play was, understandably, cut. So Clytemnestra's adultery with Aegisthus was not revealed and, to those who did not know the story, a layer of her character, and a twist in the plot, were missing.

This was an extremely bold choice of play, but it was entirely vindicated by the highly intelligent, confident and skilful way in which the director and company rooted out and revealed its meaning. The production was so full of good ideas. It was not, and could never be, easy watching. But there seemed to be such a commitment among the group to tell the story and engage our interest, that it was an object lesson in the enduring power of theatre over the ages. A play which was first performed to an audience of thousands in Athens nearly two thousand five hundred years ago lived again in a totally different scale and setting and a newly forged theatrical style.

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