

# From the Ashes, a New South Africa

*Molóra*, directed by Yael Farber, achieves something startlingly similar through its profound reinterpretation of *The Oresteia*, which she adapted and workshopped with her actors. This mesmerizing production by a young auteur leads me to believe that South Africa has far outgrown its old position as whipping boy for the world. It is now poised to be our teacher.

*Molóra* opens as a chorus of six Xhosa women and one man remove a groundcloth revealing a hump of dirt center stage. It is Agamemnon's fresh grave, which becomes the focus of the production, an earthy variation on Peter Brook's magic circle. Fearing the revenge Orestes is ordained to take for the murder of his father, Clytemnestra, who is white, badgers Electra, who is black, "Where is my son? Where is Orestes?" When Electra resists, Clytemnestra plunges her daughter's head into a bucket of water, gags her mouth and burns her with cigarettes. No torture breaks Electra, who comforts herself by writhing in the dirt of her father's grave. Clytemnestra assuages herself with a simple belief, "My ally is justice."

The chorus sits upstage, like jurors, as Electra leans calmly into a table microphone and asks her mother, "Tell this commission how you tried to drag out from me my brother's whereabouts." Farber transmutes Greek tragedy into South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Headed by Bishop Desmond Tutu after the dismantling of apartheid, the TRC offered amnesty for past crimes in exchange for the truth. (See sidebar.)

Orestes, played by a black actor, finally arrives and Electra encourages him: "If we don't revenge, what are we? Collaborators in our own death." When Orestes falters, Electra embraces his responsibility until the chorus prevents her from the vengeful murder Orestes cannot commit. There will be no further murders and no revenge. Justice begins.

Like all successful productions of the classics, *Molóra* is about the present. It answers the question posed by every Greek tragedy—What is to be done?—by endorsing justice over revenge, life over death, hope for the future over bitterness about the past. The chorus embodies the common people of South Africa. They, rather than a Greek god appearing suddenly, possess the wisdom to end the cycle of violence.

BY RUSSELL VANDENBROUCKE