Mercy stays revenge’s hand

Reworking of classic trilogy opts for what may be a very South African ending

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...gripping and effective meditation on cycles of revenge, MoLoRa, has finally come to Joburg four years after its premiere in Grahamstown. Soon it will embark on an international tour that will take it to the Barbican in London later this year, and the Netherlands and the US next year.

Farber serves as an artistic ambassador of sorts for Africa — her universally significant work is not enmeshed with Africanness; she is simultaneously concerned with classical narratives. Sizahl was African Shakespeare, MoLoRa is Aeschylus’s Orestian trilogy; she is now working on an adaptation of King Lear set in the Middle East.

The three protagonists at the centre of MoLoRa (molora means ‘ash’ in Sotho) are exceptionally competent. Sandile Mathebeni as Orestes manages a clear, stylised male anger; Jabulile ‘Tshabala as Electra is a bloodthirsty woman who is pitiful when clawing at her mother for affection; Dorothy Ann Gould as Klytemnestra achieves a fragility and humanity that accentuates, instead of opposing, her brutality.

It is thanks largely to Gould’s success that MoLoRa can depart convivially from Aeschylus, and Orestes can choose to spare his mother’s life. Her pleading with him to not become “like me” — empty, violent, black-hearted — is partly what stays his hand.

That being said, the real star of MoLoRa is the chorus. The play would lack the dazzling artistic vision it achieves if it weren’t for the six women and one man who surround it. Tsolwana Mpyapya, the one man, co-founded the Ngqoko Cultural Group in Lady Frere in 1980, and now directs it. Nokhaya Mvoyo inherited the calling to become a diviner, and is a sought-after praise singer. Nokhaya Mvoyo plays all traditional Xhosa bows. Nokhaya Mvoyo is a widower with four children and five grandchildren, as well as a bow player, overtone singer, and mask dancer. Nokhaya Mvoyo is the eldest — she plays umqhubu (mouth bow), uma (percussion bow), and is an overtone singer. Nosimwe Ntshane is the group’s jester and master musician. Tshutshe Lungisa plays bows and jew’s harp. Together, they would make Aeschylus long to have been born in the Eastern Cape. Their solemn presence, formal purity, and mystical engagement with the action on stage makes them central as well as peripheral. Indeed, their hinting at what the Furies will do to Orestes as revenge for matricide combines with Gould’s Klytemnestra to change the course of the classical narrative.

The dramatic tension of MoLoRa is created by the seemingly inexorable movement of the son exiled, and thus saved, by his sister. Towards revenge with her father who was killed by his mother.

But the original cruelty was the father’s: Agamemnon killed Klytemnestra’s baby, then raped and later married her. Will Orestes become like Agamemnon? Will the cycle of revenge be perpetuated by the slaying of the mother by her son?

In ancient Greece, Aeschylus answered yes; in Farber’s vision, the answer is no. Her director’s notes pointing to Palestine, religious fundamentalism, and other revenge cycles, suggest that she thinks South Africa’s greatest export might be the ability — like that of the chorus — to practise mercy as if it were a musical instrument.

MoLoRa is at the Barney Simon Theatre in the Market Theatre complex until June 3.