Breaking a cycle of violence gives us hope

We are programmed to expect brutality to breed brutality, so a way out comes as a surprise – and a disappointment

MOLOBA

Moloba directed by Yael Farber

Review: Mary Cargill

Smoke twists from an open pot where a live, orange flame flickers. Thick clouds of black rise into the air. Standing over his father’s grave, a bare chested Orestes contemplates killing his mother.

A chorus of Xhosa women intone, then commentate and yell. A thump in a drum reverberates. The mood is anxious. Will Orestes revenge the death of his father?

It is not just the Matriarchal twist to Schuyler’s Orestes Trilogy that makes Moloba zing but also the beauty of potent visuals, natural elements – dust, fire and water – and the emotive language and deep, growling sounds that seem to emanate from the bowels of the earth. They render it a sensual and intellectual adventure.

Stripped of the elements that obscure the primal impulses that define the human condition, Moloba presents the complexities of raw human emotion and movement. The characters are almost like the eco-system as their spirits writhe and throttle about in a struggle to liberate themselves from the overwhelming and instinctual emotions that imprison them. It is the unrestrained urge for revenge that casts a spell over Moloba’s end.

Vengeance isn’t just an age-old theme drawn from Greek tragedy. Director Yael Farber provides this fraught impulsion as a gut reaction, an instinctive response to death, violence and betrayal. The eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth motif isn’t just parodied in Moloba, every strand of its intricate nature comes to the fore.

So, while the base emotions that drive vengeance are accessed, Moloba, in the tradition of Greek theatre, also poses a cerebral puzzle in revenge ever justified? Can vengeance intimidate the innocent?

Moloba opens with Clytemnestra, superbly played by Dorothy Ama Gwili, admitting to killing her husband, Agamemnon, father to Electra (Jabulile Tshabalala) and Orestes (Gablele Mashinini).

Her confession takes place at a desk in front of a microphone, recalling familiar scenes from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. The reference to the TRC may be subtle, but the situation has wider implications that are woven into every thread of this emotive story and reflect on the TRC’s role in averting vengeance.

Clytemnestra’s confession does not absolve her guilt. During her all-night confession, she rationalises her actions but, at night, her remorse is tumultuous.

Per Electra, Clytemnestra’s adulteration also does little to shift her feelings. In fact, the hatred she harbours against her mother is intensified by her willingness to confess her crimes. That Clytemnestra’s confession veers on boastful adds to the growing tension between mother and daughter, who are bound together by loathing, not affection.

Moreover, Clytemnestra’s sentiments are likely to be woeful. Confessions do little to satisfy the desire for revenge; instead, they can operate as a trigger. Is there a practice that can rid victims and perpetrators from the burden they carry?

In the previous relationship between Electra and Clytemnestra, Electra takes on the role of victim – she is parasitized by anger and fear. Her hatred consumes her and grows at her to such a degree that she surrenders her entire being to the pursuit of obliterating Clytemnestra. It does not draw on her that avenging her father’s death makes her no different to her sworn enemy: her mother.

It is through Clytemnestra that the consequences of revenge come into plain view. Agamemnon’s death has not liberated the pain he caused; instead, her violent actions have paved the way for a sadistic persona. And so the cycle of violence becomes entrenched.

Ultimately, Clytemnestra learns that there is no escaping the weight of her actions. "What is done is done," she repeats, like a mantra, even though it falls on deaf ears. Her murderous actions cannot be overlooked. No further measures can be taken to reverse what has already taken place.

This obvious fact should render revenge futile operation, but it doesn’t. Not for Clytemnestra; the chaotic impulsive nature of revenge, though it appears irrational, continues to be played out on political stages. Farber suggests that the urge to consult revenge is an instinctual act. But both are the residue left by the water of retribution. It all depends on which position you assume – perpetrator or victim.

As Moloba develops, perpetrators and victims become interchangeable. Clytemnestra becomes the architect of a brutal act, while Clytemnestra assumes the role of victim, undermining the cyclical nature of violence.

Although Mashinini delivers a wooden performance (he does not reveal the conflict that no doubt broils within his troubled soul), his character is central to the resolution of the play.

It is up to Clytemnestra to make a choice – either she can end the cycle of violence or perpetuate it.

Farber suggests that victims have agency. Revenge is such a20936

In this way Moloba echoes Schuyler’s trilogy which also reveals the tension between reason and emotion. Of course, Aeschylus employed reason to justify revenge rather than to avert it.

But Farber has adapted Aeschylus’ tragedy to better suit contemporary concerns. She offers a more specifically, the South African context, where violence and vengeance often arise from the ideological blood that defines our Rainbow Nation. Farber has not simply "Africanised" Aeschylus’s play as a means of subverting western culture in order to serve her from the colonial authority that has overshadowed African culture for so long. Rather, by conjoining the mores of western theatre that echo contemporary South African theatre, she dissolves some of the superficial barriers that separate African and European expression.

This reconceptualisation elicits, of course, school in the play’s joyful denouement. Although Aeschylus’s trilogy also ended on a cheerful note, one can’t help feeling thwarted. From the moment the play kicks off, one progresses to a bloody climax, and it is here that Farber forces her characters to reflect on their actions. This moment screams to be rewritten as "to live for blood". And it is just an individual response. Revenge is a concept that is embedded in cultural expression. So, although one leaves Moloba with an overwhelming sense of discomfort, there is a sense of relief.

Where does justice fit into this happy ending? Has the concept of justice been redefined in South Africa?