

The British Theatre Guide

Molora

By Yael Farber (after Aeschylus and Sophocles) Farber Foundry Production @ The Pit, Barbican
Review by Howard Loxton (2008)

Originally produced in association with the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, in 2003 and having its British premier at Oxford Playhouse (British co-produces) earlier this month, this is a South African take on *The Libation Bearers*, the second play of the Oresteia, drawing also on ideas from *The Eumenides*, the final play in which Orestes and the ghost of Klytemnestra present their cases before the goddess Athena and an Athenian jury. The setting is not archaic Greece but a Xhosa village and the libation bearers supporting Elektra at her father Agamemnon's grave are played by the singer-musicians of the Ngqoka Cultural Group, the sound of whose split-tone singing and traditional mouth harps, calabash bows and drums establish the atmosphere that pervades this work.

A dusty black plastic sheet covers the stage in front of a row of chairs, to one side at the rear a table with a microphone, on the other side another. A woman slowly drags the plastic into a bundle, uncovering a mound of sand with a mattock beside it. One by one other women enter from the corners of the theatre. They wear head-cloths and plaid blankets over their shoulders, as their fugue-like song builds they take their places on the chairs, joined by a solitary man. An older woman, white and dressed in red, sits at the upstage table, a young woman, black, at the one on the other side of the stage. The white woman speaks into the microphone, in English, her voice quiet but strong, confident and masculine. This is Klytemnestra telling us why she killed her husband Agamemnon. The younger woman is her daughter Elektra, speaking sometimes in English, but mainly in Xhosa. They act out some of their story before us. Klytemnestra pulls out another bundle of black plastic and out of it rolls the body of Agamemnon which she buries in the sand. Elektra, frightened for the safety of Orestes, her baby brother, has him taken far away. Klytemnestra tortures her trying to find out where he is. Seventeen years pass and a grown Orestes returns...The action follows that of Aeschylus but as Elektra cries for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, urging Orestes to strike the final blow and kill their mother the chorus intervene. In 1995, post-apartheid South Africa convened the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The new South Africa has its own way of turning the vengeful Furies into 'The Kindly Ones.'

This is a passionate, blood-soaked and very moving telling of the ancient epic, powerfully played. A viscerally physical performance -- Elektra is held with her head under water, burned with a glowing cigarette, or gripped in a contradictory motherly embrace; Orestes swings a mattock wildly around his head, Klytemnestra gives birth to a writhing snake -- it is not for the faint-hearted.

The Xhosa singing and dancing enhance the ritual element but it is a pity that we have no way of knowing what comment on or contribution to the argument these villagers are making. Language also made it impossible to fully understand Jabulile Tshabalala's deeply felt Elektra; nor, from my seat at the extreme side, could I always clearly hear Dorothy Ann Gould's impressive Klytemnestra when she was speaking away from me. However, the intensity of their playing ensured that one was always emotionally engaged. Into their conflicting world comes Sandile Matsheni's Orestes, draped in a white blanket, a Christ-like symbol of innocence. Yet, since he pretends to be bringing his own ashes, he cannot be without guile and perhaps the exchange of the white for a brown blanket has a particular African significance. There is a quiet calm about him and, though Elektra drives him to kill Aegisthus and tear his heart from his body (symbolised by drawing a dripping organ from a Wellington boot), he clearly represents the new spirit of the nation and it is no accident that such a fine looking actor has been cast.

Molora apparently means 'ash' in the Sesotho language and here we have not just the ashes that Orestes brings but the play ends with a fine shower of ash falling from above, a ritual for all those lost in the bitter years of the apartheid era.

At the Barbican until 19th April; touring to Rose Kingston-upon-Thames 20th-24th May, Northern Stage Newcastle-upon-Tyne 3rd-5th June 2008

Reviews

Molora

Based on the *Oresteia*, adapted by Yael Farber
Oxford Playhouse and the Farber Foundry
Northern Stage, Newcastle, and touring

Review by Gail-Nina Anderson (2008)

The modernisation of classic Greek drama is usually a doomed venture. The problem lies not in its themes (still pretty universal) or characters (we meet them everyday) but in form and context. The sense of a shared ritual is difficult to convey from the stage of a theatre, while an unforced awareness that it has a

meaning, reinforcing some vital element in our world, effecting a change in the very air we breathe – well, that’s asking a bit much from the revival of a centuries-old play, however we dress it up.

The odd thing about *Molora* is how little sense one has that this is a modernisation of Aeschylus’ original of some 2500 years ago. Yes, there’s no doubt that this version is set in South Africa in the wake of Apartheid, but the alienating dissociation that usually cuts in between ancient drama and modern setting just isn’t present. Form and content are so unified that there really is a sense here of how theatre might once have served to define the shape of the world.

The story is demonstrably the old one of the wounds created when individuals, family, clan and society tug in different directions. Klytemnestra has killed her husband Agamemnon, just when she should have been celebrating his triumphant return from war. Nobody seems to have thought through that his sacrifice of their daughter (not to mention the savage killing of Klytemnestra’s first husband and child) might have left his wife damaged, just as she fails to realise that this conjugal murder will call down the furies of bitterness and festering hatred. Revenge doesn’t have a logical end, so

