

## Harlem Becomes Electra: Review of Sophocles's *Electra*

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Sophocles's *Electra* has found a home in the small, intimate theatre of the Classical Theater of Harlem (CTH). Writer and director Alfred Preisser has thoroughly re-imagined and adapted the ancient script "to find the present tense, the reason to do this play now. It's not just the fact that this *Electra* is set in the United States, that it looks very much like it does now. It's also the fact the she [Electra] will not let go of the past, that she is forced into a situation where she must repeat the past." (The Record, May 25, 2007). The result is a driving and riveting production at once ancient in its myth and archetypal themes and yet decidedly contemporary in its diction, characters and rhythm.

Sophocles's original script is a drama of guile (*dolos*) and deception with a plot concocted by the Paidagogus and Orestes in the prologue. Preisser has eliminated both the Paidagogus and Pylades and substituted a pre-show Orestes lurking around the edges of the stage and wandering lost and distracted through the audience. He opens the play with a brief monologue "It's beginning..." while he ritually loads his army pistol bullet by bullet by bullet. He then disappears, as he does in Sophocles's script, to leave the stage to the women of Argos who dominate the action. As the returning veteran from a war that promised glory and freedom only to bring disillusion and frustration, Samuel Ray Gates plays both the pathos of the lost, wounded soldier and the puzzled naivete of a child who can be manipulated by both mother and sister. Gates is a physically large, muscled and attractive Orestes but a tired and stuttering hero deeply traumatised by the war.

With the Paidagogus and Pylades eliminated and Orestes's role limited to the beginning and end of the play, Preisser's adaptation focuses precisely on the women of Argos: "I think what's very 'now' about it [Sophocles's play] is the problem of the men just not being there. They're very absent." The Chorus of women of Argos has been reduced in its number and vision. A Chorus of four (Tracy Jack, Khadeejah Gray, Christina Sajous and Sandra Miller) offer comfort and advice to Electra as Sophocles's Chorus does in the original script. But here their lyrical and universalising role is abbreviated. They offer no extended meditation on the nature of justice, no allusions to the bloody past and the curse over the House of Atreus, no predictions of future success and victory. Indicative of the entire production, they restrict themselves to the moment and to Electra and provide understatement, countering the emotional outbursts of the other characters. Long choral interludes find no place in Preisser's breakneck pace to murder and destruction.

Adumbrated is the character of Chrysothemis, played youthfully and yet confidently by Trisha Jeffrey. Dressed primly in her buttercup dress with covering white apron, white socks and strapped shoes with two barrettes anchoring her perfect hair, Jeffrey provides a classic foil for Electra both visually and emotionally. But Jeffrey also changes the rhythm and mood of the play with her comic tea party (including tea set, tray with doily and accompanying dolly) and vitriolic monologue on the role she is forced to play in the family, "holding it together." Her fictitious tale of witnessing the murder of her father Agamemnon and subsequent recanting of the lie seems emotionally right for a young girl neglected and never recognised.

Also enlarged is the role of Clytemnestra, played theatrically and larger than life by Petronia Paley. Restricted to the second half and to two scenes in Sophocles's original, Preisser's Clytemnestra dominates the action, making the entire plot a battleground between mother and daughter. Paley's Clytemnestra is at once imposing matriarch, domineering mother and actress always onstage playing to an audience. While her dress seems reminiscent of a bygone era (elaborate sleep ware, formal dresses and suit with tricorn hat), her diction is aggressively prosaic, contemporary and American with "Okay" and "Give me a break!" and "You make me puke" punctuating her narratives. Her feelings for Electra are complex but masked by her constant play-acting and her literal mask of over-done make-up exuding the aura of the vamp and older woman with her "boy-toy" Aegisthus. Also complicating the audience's reception are her presentational blocking and several asides to the audience: "How many of you have children?" Paley's Clytemnestra is sexually provocative, emotionally destructive and highly entertaining even to the staging of her own murder.

As in the Greek original, the driving force and centre of the volcano at Argos is Electra, played obsessively and intelligently by Zainab Jah. A small, wiry and physically fragile woman, Jah has a resonant and lyrical voice. Her arc is the largest in Preisser's adaptation, and Jah expresses the full gamut/range of emotions: longing for her dead father, hatred for her mother, yearning for her lost brother and disgust for her obedient sister. Jah proves an able orator in arguments with her mother, a lyrical mourner, dancing her loss and lament, and a fierce warrior demanding the death of her enemy. The last moment of Preisser's script focuses on Jah's Electra downstage centre, applying kabuki-like make-up (resembling the eyebrows, lipstick and heavy cosmetics of her

mother) and then slowly ascending to Clytemnestra's bedroom. As the return of Orestes from the war resembles Agamemnon's, so Electra repeats the past and becomes her mother.

Troy Hourie's set design is simple and economic but provides both variety and verticality to the small, intimate theatre. A high ramp or runway angles backward stage right, while steps lead up to a curtained bedroom (for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus) stage left. Just right of centre is a low box used by Electra to hide and mourn, by Chrysothemis for her tea party, as a sandbox by the sea and finally the site for Clytemnestra's murder. Prominent both at the beginning and end of the CTH production is a screen or netting hung between audience and stage action. The netting evokes the steamy sensuality of the Argive seascape and also the netting so important in the original tragic myth. As a theatrical scrim it both distances the audience and yet allows the audience to see through the screen the ritualised murder of Clytemnestra occurring offstage in the Greek original. Also metatheatrical is the suspended dagger, appearing magically early in the production and used as the murder weapon for Clytemnestra.

Kimberly Glennon's costume design cleverly contrasts the carefully dressed Clytemnestra and Chrysothemis with the tattered Orestes and Electra. Orestes's army fatigues evoke the long and dirty war just past, while Electra's ragged shorts and sleeveless top resemble her brother's costume. Although director Preisser states that the production is contemporary, Clytemnestra's robes and finery and Chrysothemis's girlish outfit seem stolen from a Tennessee Williams play and the World War II. The visual eclecticism contributes to the timelessness of the entire production, that the plot action of returning veteran and the costs of war on fragmented families also relates to the World War II, Korea and Vietnam as well as to contemporary realities. An important feature of the sound design is the repeated and archetypal sound of waves crashing against the beach of Argos, evidently now a seaside resort. Kelvyn Bell, as music director, directs a live jazz band providing instrumental music only occasionally for the production.

Alfred Preisser has radically altered and pruned Sophocles's ancient tragedy to create an intense vision of a contemporary, dysfunctional family traumatised and destroyed by war. Preisser sees that "the United States is stuck in the past. The version of the country that we get from our leaders is based on the cowboy movies of the 1950s." So too are the women of the CTH Argos, obsessed by memories of the past and doomed to repeat the past. Though Preisser has eliminated many characters, scenes, conventions and the lyricism of the original Greek tragedy, he has heightened both the raw, emotional intensity of the conflicts and the rollercoaster pace of the action, As "mourning becomes Electra" in several senses, so Harlem becomes Electra with a production demonstrating the ways Greek tragedy continues to inform, influence and entertain.

**Note:**

Sophocles, *Electra*

The Harlem School of the Arts Theatre, 24th May - 24th June 2007

Directed by Alfred Preisser

Produced by The Classical Theatre of Harlem, Inc.

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