



GREEK XHOSA: Dorothy Ann Gould as Klytemnestra, and the Chorus, played by the Ngqoko Cultural Group

Mercy stays revenge's hand

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

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YAEL Farber's 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 embellished with Africanism; it is essentially African, even archetypically so. She is simultaneously concerned with classical narratives: *SeZaR* was African Shakespeare; *MoLoRa* is Aeschylus's Oresteian 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 Matsheni as Orestes manages a clear, stylised male anger; Jabulile Tshabalala as Elektra is as bloodthirsty when hysterically vengeful as she is pitiful when clawing at her mother for affection; Dorothy Ann Gould as Klytemnestra achieves a fragility and humanity that accentuate, instead of opposing, her brutality.

It is thanks largely to Gould's success that *MoLoRa* can depart convincingly 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



BLOOD MUMMY: Dorothy Ann Gould as Klytemnestra

six women and one man who surround it.

Tsolwana Mpayipheli, the one man, co-founded the Ngqoko Cultural Group in Lady Frere in 1980, and now directs it.

Nofenishala Mvotyo inherited the calling to become a diviner, and is a sought-after praise singer. Nogcinile Yekani plays all

traditional Xhosa bows. Nokhaya Mvotyo is a widower with four children and five grandchildren, as well as a bow player, overtone singer, and beat dancer. Nopasile Mvotyo is the eldest — she plays *umnibhe* (mouth bow), *uhadi* (percussion bow), and is an overtone singer.

Nosomething Ntese is the group's jester and a master musician. Tandiwe 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 revenging with her his 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, suggests 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.