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

MOLORA
directed by Yael Farber

Review: Mary Corrigall

Smoke twirls from an open pot where a live, orange flame flickers. Thick clouds of dust fill the air. Standing over his father's grave, a bare-chested Orestes contemplates killing his mother.

A chorus of Xhosa women ululate, commiserate and yell. A thump on a drum reverberates. The mood is anxious. Will Orestes revenge the death of his father?

It is not just the Afrocentric twist to Aeschylus's *Oresteia Trilogy* that makes *Molora* zing but also the heady mix of potent visuals, natural elements – dust, fire and water – explicit, emotive language and deep, groggy 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, *Molora* presents the complexities of raw human emotions unadorned. The characters almost beg for a reprieve as their spirits writhe and thrash about in a struggle to liberate themselves from the overwhelming and instinctual emotions that imprison them. It is the unrelenting urge for revenge that casts a spell over *Molora's* cast.

Vengeance isn't just an age-old theme drawn from Greek tragedy. Director Yael Farber presents this fraught impulse as a gut reaction, an instinctual response to death, violence and betrayal. The eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth motif isn't just paraphrased in *Molora*, every strand of its intricate nature comes under the spotlight.

So, while the base emotions that drive vengeance are accessed, *Molora*, in the tradition of Greek theatre, also poses a cerebral puzzle: is revenge ever justified? Can vengeance obliterate hatred?

Molora opens with Clytemnestra, superbly played by Dorothy Ann Gould, admitting to killing her husband, Agamemnon, father to Electra (Jabulile Tshabalala) and Orestes (Sandile Matsheni).

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 allusion 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 waking hours, she can rationalise her actions but, at night, her remorse haunts and tortures her.

For Electra, Clytemnestra's admission 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.

Molora articulates the frustration inherent in the TRC process: 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 of the burdens they carry?

In the noxious relationship between Electra and Clytemnestra, Electra takes on the role of victim – she is paralysed by anger and fear. Her hatred consumes her and gnaws at her to such a degree that she surrenders her entire being to the pursuit of obliterating Clytemnestra. It does not dawn 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 her from 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 overturned. No further measures can be taken to reverse what has already taken place.

This obvious fact should render revenge a futile operation, but it doesn't. Not for Clytemnestra, Electra nor in a universal sense – though an illogical impulse, it continues to be played out on political stages.

Farber suggests that the urge to commit revenge is as instinctual as guilt. Both are the residue left by the wake of malevolence. It all depends on which position you assume – perpetrator or victim.

As *Molora* develops, perpetrators and victims become interchangeable – Electra becomes the architect of a brutal act, while Clytemnestra assumes the role of victim, underpinning the cyclical nature of violence.

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

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

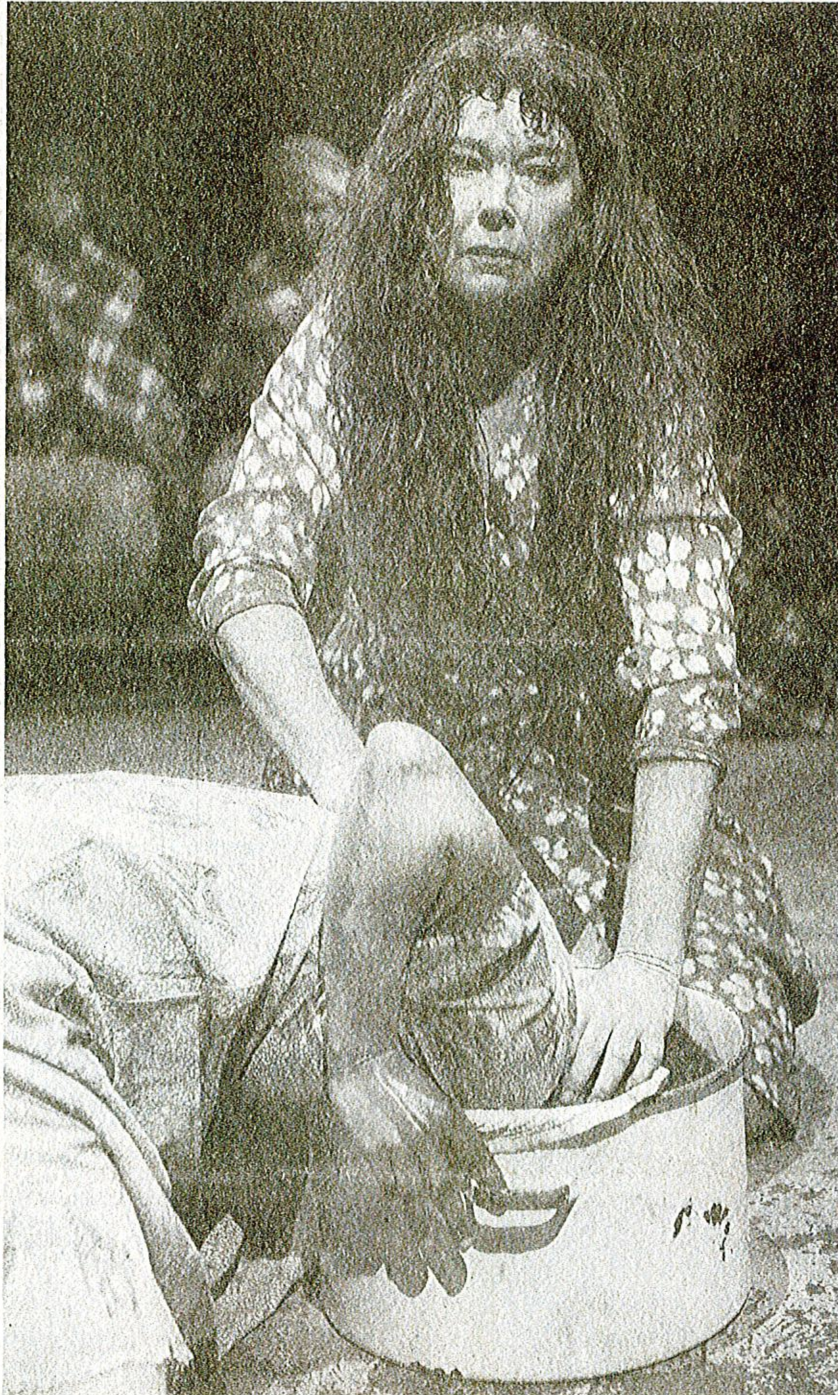
Farber suggests that victims have agency. Revenge is such a tempting action for victims because it appears to furnish them with what they have lost: power. But Farber suggests that the choice afforded to victims automatically confers upon them influence – they have the power to halt the cycle of violence.

In this way *Molora* echoes Aeschylus's trilogy, which also reveals the tension between reason and intuition. Of course, Aeschylus employed reason to justify revenge rather than to avert it.

But Farber has adapted Aeschylus's tragedy to suit contemporary mores or, more specifically, the South African context, where vengeance has no place in the ideology that defines our Rainbow Nation. Farber has not simply "Africanised" Aeschylus's play as a means of subverting western culture in order to sever ties from the colonial authority that has overshadowed African culture for so long. Rather, by conjuring the cornerstones of western theatre that echo contemporary South African issues, she dissolves some of the superficial barriers that separate African and European expression.

This reconciliatory ethos is, of course, echoed in the play's joyful denouement. Although Aeschylus's tragedy also ended on a cheerful note, one can't help feeling thwarted. From the moment the play kicks off, one prepares for a bloody climax, and it is here that Farber forces introspection on her audience. It becomes obvious that we are programmed to "vie for blood". And it is not just an instinctual response: vengeance is a concept that is embedded in cultural expression.

So, although one leaves *Molora* ebullient with optimism, there is an overwhelming sense of discomfort. Where does justice fit into this happy ending? Has the concept of justice been redefined in South Africa?



Initiating violence transforms Clytemnestra (Dorothy Ann Gould) into a sadistic character who abuses her daughter Electra (Jabulile Tshabalala), who in turn becomes consumed by revenge