



Friday 4th April 2008

Theatre Review | MOLORA | The Farber Foundry @ Oxford Playhouse [tour]

A woman, dressed in rough clothes and a knitted shawl, pulls a black tarpaulin away to reveal a small stage with a burial mound in the centre. The proscenium arch of the Playhouse has been transformed with scaffolding and plastic chairs. Two tables sit at the corners of the stage, with microphones. As the woman sings, others join, weaving in from the audience to take their seats, chanting eerily.

This is an adaptation of the *Oresteia*, and Aeschylus has been transformed by Yael Farber's use of the Ngqoko Cultural Group as Chorus, and by faultless artistic decisions in set, casting and direction. The opening is electrifying and evocative in the small space, and it is the voice of Klytaemnestra which breaks a long silence. Dorothy Ann Gould's magnificent performance begins here. Everything about her manner evokes passionate contradiction: murderous violence pressed against deep emotional sadness; a tough, manly voice and the broken heart of a mother; a courageous and ferocious heart coupled with a mind beset by anguished nights and paranoid days. It is ravishing and exhausting simply to watch her. Elektra is softer, more girlish, less monstrous and makes a strong contrast with her mother. Sandile Matsheni first appears as the naked corpse of Agamemnon but returns to the stage at the climax as an Orestes as physically beautiful as he is intimidating.

The choreography of the work is outstanding, and in such an intimate space the characters loom large, driving us back in horror at the same time as they drag us into their bloody tragedy. Klytaemnestra stands on a table bearing a pick, pregnant with savage lust, and Orestes glides across the stage like a black angel intent on fulfilling his curse of vengeance. Yael Farber has directed a stunning play, full of moments of great beauty and resonance: as Klytaemnestra, drunk, crushes her cigarette in a piece of chicken on her plate at dinner, the image is vividly evoked of her crushing another cigarette on the body of her daughter in a brutal attempt to elicit the whereabouts of Orestes. As Orestes daubs himself in hot blood, the audience is reminded of Klytaemnestra's monstrous tableau at the beginning of the play after the murder of Agamemnon when she smears her arms and face with gore.

It is a tribute to the power of this production that the audience wants Orestes to murder his mother. Farber evokes, compellingly and uncomfortably, a base desire for revenge in her audience, only to deny the animal satisfaction at the end to reflect the reality of post-apartheid life in South Africa. Farber stirs up all our sympathies, directs them in hatred and horror and anger, and ultimately illuminates the futility of these impulses. Brilliantly, she makes Klytaemnestras of us all.

The play is not without its faults, and I wouldn't have chosen to quote *Hamlet*, nor to rely quite so heavily on the unintelligible SeSotho dialect for the Chorus (it diminishes the choral qualities of reflection and explanation on events and does not do justice to Aeschylus' handling of this device). But I left knowing that something special had occurred onstage at the Playhouse. When Tish Francis steps down on the 7 April to hand over to Michelle Dickson as Artistic Director, this production will make a memorable end to her tenure, and her work has been a credit to theatre in the UK. But that is not why you should clear your diary for *Molora*. The reason is that this is theatre at its most intense and inspiring. It is wonderfully adapted from the Greek, and although it takes South African apartheid as its context, its heart beats with a luminous humanity.

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