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Aeschylus Comes Alive as a Mother's Revenge is Presented at La Mama

February 29, 2016

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NEW YORK – When the audience at the La Mama theater saw the characters of Aeschylus powerful drama of revenge in the aftermath of the Trojan war enter the stage dressed in their Sunday-best suits and dresses, they probably thought they would see quaint modern adaptation of an ancient play.

What they got was a disturbing reminder of what often lies beneath the surface of bourgeois propriety.

Agamemnon, puffed with pride as his subjects cheered his triumphant return to his kingdom sacking Troy, never saw Queen Clytemnestra's knife coming, although her chilly reception across the deep stage via the bloodless medium of a modern was a hint.

The setting reminded of Orson's Wells' classic shot across a huge breakfast table that signaled the death of the marriage in Citizen Kane. Agamemnon should have sent his security detail to check out his palace before rushing inside home sweet home.



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They would have found his first cousin Aegisthus – Christos Alexandrides – busy setting a trap, in behalf of his lover the Queen, and his father Thyestes (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thyestes>), the twin brother and victim of Agamemnon’s father, Atreus.

Agamemnon’s girlfriend Cassandra saw it all but it was the fate of the prophetess, played with a harrowing energy by Ioanna Katsarou, clad (in the beginning) in black and crowned by a headdress of dark feathers, that no one ever believed her.

Martha Tompoulidou as the herald was a fiery voice of reason – along with the fine chorus of children and adults – and an agent of justice after the murder. Her reward was delivered at the point of the Aegisthus’ sword, falling not far from the naked corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra.

Before the later scenes which held the audience spellbound they were captivated by the mighty lines of Greece’s first great playwright. Aeschylus’s poetry was beautifully rendered into modern Greek by Dimitris Dimitriadis and Robert Fagels’ fine English translation was projected above the stage.

Agamemnon – the first play in the Oresteia, the trilogy continues with Orestes avenging his father by killing his mother – was an Eclipses Theater NY and Actors without Borders – ITONY production and audience members hope to experience the two remaining plays.

Zishan Ugurlu, who is Turkish and was born in Istanbul, deftly married the brooding play’s first part, with its examination of family love and obligations and warnings about war, and the second half when the subconscious mind bursts forth to reveal the dark side of aristocracy.

Theodora Papachristofilou Loukas, a founding member and producer of Eclipses, played Clytemnestra and her concerns with personal and transcendental justice with stately, and later – when the husband who murdered her daughter Iphigenia returned – steely determination.

Her gowns were the most impressive on stage, with and without the blood stains they ultimately acquired.

Loukas told TNH that in the trilogy, Aeschylus maps the path of mankind, represented by Orestes, from man being a slave to his instincts and passions, expressed by the single minded pursuit of revenge, to the rise of cities where justice can be pursued in a more human and rational way as society passes from tyranny to democracy.

2500 years later, the themes could be “ripped from the headlines.”

The continued relevance of Aeschylus’ themes is what draws Ugurlu to his plays. His principle message is that people must constantly consider “what is justice in the context of how democracy should function” on the societal level “and what is hubris” on the personal level. The tragedians also examine what she believes are the most important questions – “ what is war, whose fault are they, what do we gain and lose?”

Urgulu is from a country that knows war from all angles, including observing refugees marching through.

She is herself proof that war can be transcended.

“I was born in Istanbul” with roots in Erzurum – ancient Theodosiopolis – “but we all come from Greece, no?”

She feels a strong affinity with Hellenism. As an actress she played Helen and Antigone and directed an adaptation of Aeschylus' The Persians and is devoted to ancient Greek theater.

What is so powerful about Greek tragedy she says is the powerful dilemmas the playwrights create for people. "You really cannot easily decide what is right and what is wrong...Greek tragedy forces you to take a longer broader view of life...closely examining the circumstances and conditions of our decisions... how we make our choices and how they affect us" , inculcating a wiser way of thinking.

She agrees that another message is that we are not as free as we think, that there are powerful forces affecting our circumstances and decisions about them that we must become aware of them.

There is a touch of "the children are our future" in the production.

Ugurlu made the decision to include children in the chorus that Aeschylus populated with 12 old men. "It's very important for me – why am I doing the classics after all – to share this amazing wisdom and poetry with the younger generations.

The audience was impressed by the maturity and skill of the children. Olga Latousakis learned about the auditions from her friend Manolis Lambrakis, who also appeared. "I have acted in a lot of plays in school...it's not my major." Her best subjects, she said, are math and science.

Olga's mother Dr. Stella Lymberis said it was a grueling few weeks of rehearsals every day "we were very fortunate to be part of this production...the actors did an amazing job bringing ancient and modern Greek language together...it's important to bring that part of our heritage alive."

The original music of Costas Baltazanis laid the emotional foundation to the dramaturgy provided by Demetri Bonaros. Katerina Zoupano was the production manager and singer/actress Alexandra Skendrou was production assistant.

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