

British Theatre Guide

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Molora

Based on the Oresteia, adapted by Yael Farber
Oxford Playhouse and the Farber Foundry
Northern Stage, Newcastle
(2008)

The modernisation of classic Greek drama is usually a doomed venture. The problem lies not in its themes (still pretty universal) or characters (we meet them everyday) but in form and context. The sense of a shared ritual is difficult to convey from the stage of a theatre, while an unforced awareness that it has a meaning, reinforcing some vital element in our world, effecting a change in the very air we breathe well, thats asking a bit much from the revival of a centuries-old play, however we dress it up.

The odd thing about *Molora* is how little sense one has that this is a modernisation of Aeschylus original of some 2500 years ago. Yes, theres no doubt that this version is set in South Africa in the wake of Apartheid, but the alienating dissociation that usually cuts in between ancient drama and modern setting just isnt present. Form and content are so unified that there really is a sense here of how theatre might once have served to define the shape of the world.

The story is demonstrably the old one of the wounds created when individuals, family, clan and society tug in different directions. Klytemnestra has killed her husband Agamemnon, just when she should have been celebrating his triumphant return from war. Nobody seems to have thought through that his sacrifice of their daughter (not to mention the savage killing of Klytemnestras first husband and child) might have left his wife damaged, just as she fails to realise that this conjugal murder will call down the furies of bitterness and festering hatred. Revenge doesnt have a logical end, so Klytemnestras son Orestes may grow up to avenge his father, to prevent which his mother plans to kill him until sister Elektra spirits him away to grow up in safety. The absent figure of Orestes is, for much of this version, an unseen focus for the conflicting energies of the two driven women, mother and daughter. Klytemnestra has reduced Elektra to the status of a servant in her house, beaten and tortured because she holds the secret of her dangerous brothers whereabouts. Elektra survives unbroken because she feeds off fantasies of an avenging Orestes who can put things right by killing their mother and taking the place of their lost father.

Its familiar, potent territory played out with a visceral physicality by the two actresses, Dorothy Ann Gould as a white Klytemnestra and Jabulile Tshabalala as her black daughter. Gould does drunk as convincingly as Ive ever seen on the stage, but she can also pull off icy determination edged with self-doubting terror. Compelling as these performances are, what gives them their rare resonance is a chorus of singers and musicians (six women, one man) from the Xhosa-speaking Ngqoko Cultural Group. Their split-tone singing, bows, drums and resonators re-think the formal Greek chorus into a language of sound that ranges from the conversational to the unearthly, suggesting something enduring and rooted yet immediate and direct. And no, it didnt seem to matter that the language was entirely unfamiliar. It clearly created a containing wall for the central drama, with the

singers commenting, observing and exhorting characters locked into their cycle of mutual destruction.

The end of the *Oresteia* is difficult for modern audiences who have to take on board not just supernatural furies but also judicial deities for whom mothers matter less than fathers. Wisely, this gets concentrated down here to a much more essential climax that echoes the Human Rights Violations Committee hearings that took place in South Africa following the abolition of apartheid in the previous decade. The parallels, however, arent hammered home so much as elided into a satisfying whole. Orestes does return, at first winning a welcome from his mother by pretending to be merely the messenger of his own death. When he and his sister join forces their visceral need for the closure that only revenge can bring is almost painful to watch, but the end of the *Oresteia* (and, one hopes, of South Africas trials) comes not with the mathematical solution of a death for a death and a blood feud played out until there is nothing left but ashes (the meaning of *Molora*.) The Greek tragedy doesnt finish in a wave of blood but in the realisation that there can be a different way to move forward. Here the most tellingly original moment, freshly re-imagined for this new context, came when Elektra, driven into a frenzied need for revenge that leaves her twitching with inchoate rage, is quietly bundled up and cradled into calmness by the female chorus, suggesting that the new way forward is also rooted in the age-old wisdom of simple humanity.

Howard Loxton [reviewed](#) this production at the Barbican Pit

Reviewer: [Gail-Nina Anderson](#)