

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Suppliant Women

Aeschylus, new version by David Greig
Actors Touring Company & Royal Lyceum Edinburgh
Northern Stage, Newcastle
3–5 November 2016

This play dates back 2,500 years, which makes me wonder if many of our modern plays will still be produced around the year 4,500. And would there be anyone left to see them?

The Suppliant Women, directed with great verve by Ramin Gray, is not performed that often, possibly because of its unusual structure; not much happens, there is a large cast but hardly any specific characters and, unlike most classical Greek theatre, the chorus, rather than being peripheral, is at the play's centre—the main character (or characters), as it were.

Just occasionally, there is a kind of conventional dialogue, but delivered in poetically charged iambic pentameters. More often than not, in this translation from Aeschylus by David Greig, the poetic words are incanted and/or sung by the 17-strong female chorus (or the somewhat smaller male version) accompanied by Sasha Milavic Davies eye-catching choreography, whose stark strength (reminding me at times of *Rite of Spring*) is the perfect antidote to any soppy, clichéd ideas about modern dance.

Throw in John Browne's muscular music (excellently played live by Ben Burton and Callum Armstrong), some remarkable performances by this unlikely cast and you have a striking interpretation of a piece of theatre which, two and half millennia on, resonates with relevance to our modern societies.

The entire 90 minutes (no interval) is played out on Northern Stage's massive empty stage space in their main auditorium.

Here's the plot. The young women (50 in the original play) flee across the Mediterranean in an attempt to escape forced marriage with their Egyptian cousins. They seek sanctuary and asylum in the Greek port of Argos.

At first, the King declines to help but later the citizens of Argos agree to protect the refugees. Their Egyptian suitors (the male chorus) soon turn up in a ship and demand their future wives be returned. Let the conflict begin.

Spoken parts belong only to the the young women's father, Omar Ebrahim (who also doubles up the Egyptian herald), Oscar Batterham as the Greek King and Danielle Baxter as the female chorus leader.

These three are the only professional actors on view. The rest were recruited from Newcastle volunteers and have been trained and rehearsed since September. They are required to give eloquent delivery to (and often sing) the sophisticated poetic script, simultaneously performing the

demanding choreography with both imagination and perfect timing. They do all this so well as to make it look easy, which it never is.

The piece is about refugees and asylum seekers, it is about sexuality, it is about feminism, it is about forced marriage, it is about the cultural and sexual clash between the masculine and the feminine. This clash is never better symbolised than when the female chorus is swiftly followed by the male, the voices, the words and the body language throwing each into stark contrast against the other.

The sung/chanted words aren't always fully clear and having the same actor (Omar Ebrahim) play two diametrically opposed roles is unwise.

The dynamic performance of the women isn't quite matched by the men, but this is a brilliantly professional piece of community theatre whose very existence is a positive affirmation of what is possible in our present fractured and divisive society.

Reviewer: [Peter Mortimer](#)