

PRODUCER'S NOTES

Producing a play takes a great deal of preparation and I am indebted to everyone who has given so much of their time and thought to the production - especially Alex, the director, Garry and Sophie, for publicity, and Cate, for researching and making the costumes. Much thanks must also go to the academic and theatre staff for their much needed help and finally to the professionals whose skills have enhanced the production.

It is encouraging that there has been so much enthusiasm for the Greek Play. This is our sixth one at the Bloomsbury Theatre since being established as an annual event in 1987. At a time when people question the relevance of "dead" classics, it is a pleasure to be able to bring the drama to life on stage. Anyone with an interest in Greek Drama will have been spoilt by the number of recent productions around the country.

It would have been good to put on the complete trilogy but we have neither the time nor the resources. Performing the second part in isolation poses no problems because it works as a self-contained play without losing its power. (However, anyone unfamiliar with the trilogy is advised to read Professor Easterling's article.)

Two problems confront the modern producer of an Attic drama: first, the modern theatre is nothing like the Attic theatre and, secondly, the modern audience is different to the Attic audience.

The Greek theatre of the fifth century BC consisted of an *orchestra*, a flat circular dancing area used by the chorus. At the back of this there was a stage building - the *skene* - probably made of wood and painted. This contained dressing-rooms for the main actors, who had to change character during performances. The audience, as many as 14,000, stood or sat around the *orchestra* in a natural amphitheatre.

The stage at the Bloomsbury is very different and the audience much smaller. The seats at the back of the auditorium are relatively close to the stage and there should be no problem seeing and hearing the actors as there was for the Attic audience. Also, modern theatres benefit from technical gadgetry, especially lighting - something the ancient theatre had to do without. They did however use two machines, namely the *mechane* and the *ekkyklema*. The former seems to have been a crane from which a car could be suspended (i.e. the chariot at the end of the *Medea*) and the latter a device to bring tableaux scenes out of the *skene* (as would probably have been used in the *Choephoroi* to bring out the corpses).

For the ancient audience, theatre was a very different concept to that of today. The fifth century Athenians went to the theatre only during religious festivals, the greatest being the City Dionysia and the Lenaea in honour of Dionysus. It was a very important part of life and the audience was not there to view but to consider the social issues that the dramatist brought up and to learn from them. Accordingly, the dramatist was expected to be a teacher. Attic tragedy was a reflection of contemporary life through the medium of the heroic past. Does this make it awkward for the modern audience?

The social issues in tragedy are timeless but certain conventions, for example the chorus, can seem clumsy to the modern audience, whereas, for the ancients, they served as commentators - the link between past and present. Many productions try to avoid this by setting the play

in modern times. We decided against this mainly because we have not used both full-mask and traditional costume for a few years - and they are fun to use - but also because we feel that the distance between audience and character will enable the play to be viewed more objectively. The last thing to say about this is that Tony Harrison's excellent translation will help to bridge the gap between past and present.

Enjoy the show, if that is the right word for a tragedy!

Marc de Rham

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

My first major decision was of course to choose which play to work on. The *Choephoroi* seemed an obvious choice for several reasons: it is dramatically excellent with the recognition scene, then the invocation to Agamemnon's grave reaching a huge crescendo before the action begins and Orestes sets the wheels in motion to bring about the death of his mother. As well as this strong plot there are several very interesting themes: the macabre history of the curse on the house of Atreus; the dilemma that Orestes faces knowing that he must kill his mother to restore the honour of his father and avoid the threatening aspects of the oracle of Apollo; the role of the chorus which is essential to the continuity of the play both reflecting and contrasting the dialogue of the other actors. Some may think it odd that I have chosen the middle play of the *Oresteia* and yet it is interesting to notice that it is the *Choephoroi* which we know that both Sophocles and Euripides chose to adapt.

The next important choice was the translation. This was not a hard choice - as soon as I had read Tony Harrison's translation I knew that it should be used. I primarily chose it because of the dramatic style: the alliteration and assonance, similes and metaphors, and the guttural resonance of the words which when coupled with the strong rhythm is reminiscent of the sound of the original Greek. This translation is written to perform, whilst others were excellent for studying, Harrison's shone when considered dramatically.

I believed the masks to be essential for this play - apart from the fact that Harrison's notes specify their requirement, my feelings are aptly summed up in the words of Sir Peter Hall - Director of Harrison's *Oresteia* at the National Theatre:

"The passions the play deals with are so huge, so primitive, basic, the naked face cannot deal with them in verbal terms ... the emotions are so enormous that to verbalize them you have to have a mask to contain them."

(Quoted by John Barber - Daily Telegraph.)

Thank you for coming to the performance - please come again in future years and enjoy the show.

Alex Cromwell