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EDITH HALL

Aeschylus

ORESTEIA

A new version created by Robert Icke
Almeida Theatre, until July 18

Robert Icke's version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, billed as a "radical re-imagining" of this mammoth ancient masterpiece and its "first major London production" for over a decade, is the first of the Almeida "Greeks" season. The selection itself bespeaks confidence on the part of both the Artistic Director, Rupert Goold, and Icke. The *Oresteia* is the sole ancient Greek trilogy of connected tragedies to have survived from the classical Athenian theatre, and thus by far the most substantial ancient dramatic work in the repertoire. At its first performance in 458 BC it already changed the nature of tragedy, in locating the tragic action at a family home, rather than in a city square or sanctuary. It has influenced other epoch-making artworks including *Hamlet* (via Renaissance Latin cribs of Aeschylus) and Wagner's *Ring* cycle. To appreciate the Almeida team's boldness we also need to remember that the *Oresteia* has rarely been attempted except by figures of legendary stature in the international theatre: towering above them all have been Peter Stein and his two extraordinary productions in divided Germany (1980) and post-Soviet Russia (1994). Icke's self-assurance in essaying a new English acting version is thrown into further relief when one recalls that the last two *Oresteias* to be performed at the National Theatre were composed by titans of English poetry: Tony Harrison (directed by Peter Hall, 1981) and Ted Hughes (directed by Katie Mitchell, 1999).

My two criteria for assessing any contemporary production of an ancient Greek play are that it should be thrilling theatre and that its intellectual power should not fall too far short of the original's. On the first count, the Almeida *Oresteia* is a triumph. Hildegard Bechtler's design is impeccable; sliding glass doors divide the front of the acting area from its rear spaces, creating a tantalizing hinterland of bathrooms and bedrooms where intimate and sinister encounters take place. The spectators feel their own prurience in needing to crane their necks and screw up their eyes in order to see these properly. A dynamic tension is created between extended horizontal axis (the House of Atreus family dining table; the platform from which they address their public) and upward movements (the pious Agamemnon's gestures to heaven; the officious Athena who presides over the closing lawcourt scene). The largely monochrome colour palette – white, black and several shades of grey – allows the few gashes of primary colour to make a startling impact: the young female victims

Iphigenia and Cassandra both wear crocus-yellow, in ancient initiation rites the colour of pubertal girls' dresses; both status and emotional intensity are flagged by crimson dressing gowns and jackets.

The audience is kept spellbound for the best part of four hours, emerging exhausted from unremitting onslaughts on the senses and emotions. The production also tests physical powers of endurance, underlined by the brevity of the "comfort breaks", during which an army of intimidating attendants constantly bark the information that the clock is ticking and that only a few minutes remain. Above the stage, an electronic clock appears every time a murder is about to take place, clinically recording the exact minute of death in "real time". More could have been made of this disquieting device in the final episode, since, in ancient courts, defence and prosecution speeches were given precisely the same numbers of minutes; ancient litigants performed against a water-clock resembling a giant egg-timer. Yet this *Oresteia*'s sustained rapidity, along with the sense of chronometric pressure on the spectator, is exciting and innovative. Even the most important human decisions often need to be

taken precipitately, and the Greek tragedians, with their conventional "unity of time", understood how important an atmosphere of emergency is for tragic theatre. Icke has discovered a way to evoke, in a contemporary manner, the sheer speed at which classical tragedy unfolds.

His *Oresteia* is essentially a new play based on parts of four ancient tragedies. The long opening section – more than an hour in length – serves to give us the "back story". Its action takes place ten years earlier than the action of the three plays of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (which begins at the end of the Trojan War), revealing the process by which Agamemnon brought himself to execute his daughter Iphigenia. There is a surviving ancient tragedy on this theme, Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and Icke has used some of its encounters, notably a charged dialogue between Agamemnon and Menelaus. This scene makes the point that theirs was already a dysfunctional family, blighted by horrid crimes in the previous generation. But Icke's objective is to create a sense of the domestic ordinariness of Agamemnon's family – they bicker at the table and play noisy hide-and-seek; the harassed, neglected wife strains to gain her distracted statesman-

husband's undivided attention. The intimacy which the audience builds up with this family exacerbates the horror of the long silence just after Agamemnon administers a lethal pharmaceutical cocktail to his daughter Iphigenia. For we have come to know her well – her taste for the Beach Boys and her favourite cuddly toy, a floppy, long-eared hare. The hare is a typical example of Icke's resourcefulness at finding theatrical equivalents for the dense verbal imagery in Aeschylus' Greek: in the original Agamemnon, the action is symbolized in the sphere of religion by the reported portent of a pregnant hare, whose foetuses are torn from her womb by rapacious eagles. Similarly, while Icke dispenses with all choruses including the titular Libation Bearers of Aeschylus' original central tragedy (slave women who pour libations on Agamemnon's tomb), he reintegrates the libation trope in the bottles of red wine, favoured by Agamemnon, which Electra keeps opening for him.

There are memorable episodes of riveting rhetoric, flamboyantly written and emphasized by use of live on-stage video cameras and screens at the side of the auditorium. The best are Clytemnestra's public address greeting Agamemnon home from the war, his painfully clumsy response, and her vaunting speech over his corpse a few minutes later. Twice the action explodes into unforgettable, chaotic violence. The bathroom murder of Agamemnon, complete with a mesmerizing performance of Cassandra's clairvoyant ravings from the under-utilized Chara Yannis, is the best theatrical rendition I have ever seen. The other spectacular highlight is the moment when, through sudden darkness, blinding light and sound effects, we realize that Orestes' psyche suffered irreparable damage when he killed his mother. These moments are imaginative, committed, no-holds-barred enactments of devastating scenes first devised two and a half millennia ago. But there is perhaps a lesson to be learned here. These outstanding sequences happen to be the moments in Icke's play which most closely reproduce Aeschylus' original.

It is not that I have any reservations about wholesale cutting, supplementing and adaptation of ancient plays. Perhaps the most theatrically powerful version of the *Oresteia* I have witnessed was Yaël Farber's South African *Molora* (2003), in which a black Orestes decided not even to kill the white Clytemnestra who had persecuted him. In a transparent reference to the restraint of black South Africans post-apartheid, she was spared retaliatory violence. But something does go temporarily awry in the part of Icke's *Oresteia* corresponding to *Libation-Bearers*, especially in the long scene between Electra and Orestes. This was sadly unconvincing. The problem lies less in the writing than in the acting, especially in comparison with the electrifying performance of Lia Williams as Clytemnestra and Angus Wright as Agamemnon. These outstandingly