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The Shakespeare Theatre Company's *Oresteia*

Adapted by Ellen McLaughlin

Directed by Michael Kahn

Sidney Harmon Hall, Washington DC

Performance Date: May 23, 2018

Reviewed by KENDRA PRESTON LEONARD

Playwright Ellen McLaughlin's new adaptation of the *Oresteia* is one created out of both political dread and the recognition of the value and effect of political hope and compassion. Influenced by the current American political landscape, the work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Committee, and the "basic principle at work in the theater" that speaking and listening can bring closure and healing to those involved in the circles of violence that spin our lives about, it is a play of passion, dark and ironic humor, and brutal honesty. The Shakespeare Theatre Company's production is stunning and timely, and the emotions created by the actors flow easily into the audience, which was rapt during the show and excitedly buzzing about the work after.

The central figures of the production are Clytemnestra, played with ferocity and wit by Kelley Curran, and the eight-member Chorus, which represents both external witnesses to the actions of the play and the internal and personal struggles and rhetoric of the play's individuals as they grapple with their beliefs, actions, and lack of action. Curran's Clytemnestra presents an elegant face to the world and her servants—the Chorus—but beneath her façade she lives a nightmare, and her tightly controlled speech and wry phrasing communicates it well to the audience. Throughout, she is human, familiar, and intense; the Chorus refers to her as a "blistering star," and they do orbit her, listening, speaking, echoing. Her speech is fluent, almost glib at times, in contrast with Kelcey Watson's Agamemnon, whose words and delivery are those of an unquestioning zealot and militant: short and over-enunciated, suggesting precision and a sense of duty and ritual.

The Chorus, identified as Clytemnestra's household servants, begin with formal, almost stilted language and speech in Act 1 that becomes increasingly personal and alive. By the end of the play, as the Chorus tries Orestes (Josiah Bania) for matricide, they have become a whirling and arguing storm of ideas and opinions and contradictions and interruptions. They are Clytemnestra's interior as she justifies her actions to herself; they are Electra (Rad Pereira)'s memory and a devil's advocate to her stances; they are common sense and fury and compassion. In Act 2, Electra emerges from the Chorus as an individual, indicating her place in the household as just one among many who surround Clytemnestra; later Clytemnestra herself, a ghost or memory, briefly joins the Chorus as well in order to speak to Orestes from beyond the grave.

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McLaughlin sets apart the other characters through speech as well. Iphigenia, beautifully played by Simone Warren, is both innocent and knowing; a believer, like her father, in the gods, her brief appearances as first a living child and later as a memory or ghost are rendered all the more heart-breaking by her unaffected speech and the music that accompanies her—a sweet motif in the strings that recurs in slightly altered forms as the legacy of her death informs Clytemnestra's later actions. Cassandra, described by McLaughlin as an embodiment of the “immigrant's dilemma,” an “outsider, a foreigner [who] speaks truth to a society,” speaks first in Greek, to emphasize her outsider status. When she speaks for herself in English, she is angry, throwing words about; when she is possessed by Apollo and speaks prophesy from within her trance, her voice patterns change yet again, and her speech is accompanied by sound that indicates that another entity has taken control of her body. This dual inhabitation of a single body is shared by Orestes, and similarly, his speech when possessed is low and manic and accompanied by sound. In control of his own voice, he stammers, seems unsure of himself, and is cautious and slower to speak.

Music and sound play an enormous role in this production. Composer Kamala Sankaram has created ambient soundscapes using acoustic instruments, recorded sound, and electronic instruments that highlight points of tension and conflict, the different states of being and emotion the characters experience, and individual words and ideas in the text. The music often includes rapid oscillations between pitches, suggesting changeable natures and the foreboding that instability creates; tremolos mark interpersonal and internal conflict and the tension of those conflicts; and sudden bursts of percussive sound mark ineffable traumas. Silence accompanies truths, and music that mimics physical motions or gestures provides a rich aural mix that informs the audience as to just how sharp Clytemnestra's knife is, and how the water sounds as it drips out of the tub in which she kills Agamemnon. A myriad of different musical textures helps the audience move with the play in time and outlook and through grief and rage and remorse. (An interview with Sankaram follows below.)

The staging of the production is simple but nuanced. A house stands center stage, surrounded on the sides by rocks that lead up to a rocky mountain in the background. The sky pales and darkens and stars come out, and the reflection of the sun on the mountainside changes from the color of dark stone to bloody red and back again. The space just in front of the house's huge front doors becomes a pit, then a raised grave, and finally a patch of dirt tended by Electra. The choreography of the Chorus in particular is complex and smoothly executed.

The first two acts—the most physically active—move quickly, and McLaughlin has created a third act that while necessarily centered around speech rarely drags or feels slow. It is an anticlimactic end in traditional theatrical terms, but a revolutionary one in which justice and forgiveness thwart the violent desires of the Furies for revenge and unending death. The *Oresteia* is always relevant, and this new version is a brilliant one that will speak to many.

I interviewed composer Kamala Sankaram while the play was in rehearsal, and as she was in the midst of preparing some of the ambient sounds for it, having already completed the motifs and more traditional passages of music for the work.

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Kendra Preston Leonard (KPL): What can you tell us about the music for the production? Is it continuous? Focused on specific scenes or between scenes? What is the musical roadmap for the play?

Kamala Sankaram (KS): The music for this play consists of continuous underscoring rather than transitional cues. My process for creating it has been to think of it as another design element, serving to highlight the dramatic beats in the text, much as a change in lighting would. The practical result of this approach has been to create music that is modular and layered. Subtle shifts in the musical texture are cued by lines in the text. Additionally, specific characters are associated with specific timbres: Agamemnon is accompanied by metallic sounds. Iphigenia is accompanied by a string melody. Apollo is the processed sound of a humpback whale.

KPL: In a Shakespeare Theatre Company article, the author says that you're using different musical textures help the audience navigate time and space.¹ Could you expand on that?

KS: The psychology of the sound world is intended to help navigate the shifts in time. The timbres that are used in the present are very different from those used in the past. The past is warm and human. The present is dark, heavy, and contains industrial and machine sounds.

KPL: How does the theme for Iphigenia appear in different places and textures in the music?

KS: The one inarguably innocent character in the play is Iphigenia, and she is the only character who has a melodic theme. In the first act, the theme signifies her presence. In the second act, a warped version of the theme invokes her continued impact on the events of the play.

KPL: The Chorus has a lot of movement assigned to them; what is their music like and how does it contribute to their function in the play?

KS: One of the things that has been interesting about working on this piece is figuring out how the Chorus will function. There was a point where we thought about having them sing, but it didn't feel quite right. Through the rehearsal process, we have discovered the sections of the text where the members of the Chorus are essentially sharing a dramatic monologue. My work with them has focused on finding the musicality of the text, and arriving at a common sense of tempo and pulse in the delivery of the text. Thus, the text is "musicalized" in the sense that the tempo and pulse are shared between the members of the ensemble.

KPL: How do you approach the play's violence and trauma from a musical perspective?

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KS: Each act of violence in the play spurs another until the final moments when the Chorus decides to find a different way to create justice. I try to match these echoes of trauma through musical echoes: references to thematic material from the moment of violence. For example, as Electra talks with Clytemnestra about Agamemnon's murder, the violin pizzicato motive from the murders emerges.

KPL: Dramaturg Drew Lichtenberg writes that Ellen McLaughlin's adaptation of *The Oresteia* is feminist and secular.² How does that influence inform your approach to creating music for it?

KS: Ellen's adaptation grapples with the question of what is human justice as opposed to the historical "eye for an eye" demanded by the gods. The music similarly juxtaposes the human against the non-human and the organic against the inorganic. The play also asks us to see Clytemnestra as a sympathetic character. For this reason, it was important to find a way to score her violence without making her a caricature. It was also important to find a way to represent the depth of her love for Iphigenia, even though we only see Iphigenia in the first act.

KPL: You've done a lot of work that draws on the music and sounds of multiple cultures. What has it been like creating music for a piece that is from ancient Greece but remains very modern in many ways?

KS: In composing for a dramatic work, I'm interested in how music can create a sense of place. This is especially true for works like my opera *Thumbprint*, which take place in a specific country. However, the world of the STC *Oresteia* is more of a liminal space: somewhere between the past and the present, and without a specific sense of geographical location. Thus my approach has been to pay tribute to ancient Greek music without trying to specifically evoke it. The harmonic language of the piece is all based on Greek modes, but we don't hear any Greek instruments, and I don't use any references to ancient Greek music.

KPL: What is your compositional process for stage works like the *Oresteia*? How does this compare with your work in opera?

KS: As you might expect, writing music for a play is both similar to and very different from opera. I believe that the task for the composer in both cases is to support the dramatic and narrative arc of the piece (assuming you're creating a narrative piece). But the way you do this is different in an opera as compared to a play. In an opera, the composer really creates the dramatic beats for the singers. Once the text is set, it's hard for the singer to deviate from the rhythms and emotional shifts that the composer has built into the score. In a play, it's important that the actors are able to drive the dramatic beats themselves. Your job as the composer is to support the actor's choices rather than to telegraph the emotional arc through the music.

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KPL: What questions do you wish I had asked here? What else would you like to tell people about the music?

KS: Because we are building the rest of the piece through an extended rehearsal process, it was important that the music also be written in response to the discoveries made in rehearsal. What this has meant is that, rather than going off and writing by myself as I would if I were writing an opera or concert music, I'm creating something very collaboratively.

Notes

1. "Inside First Rehearsal for *The Oresteia*," Shakespeare Theatre Company, <http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/watch-listen/inside-first-rehearsal-oresteia/>.

2. Drew Lichtenberg, "Inside *The Oresteia*: Notes from the New York Workshop," Shakespeare Theatre Company, <http://www.shakespearetheatre.org/watch-listen/inside-oresteia-workshop/>.

Kendra Preston Leonard is a musicologist and music theorist whose work focuses on women and music in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and music and screen history, particularly music and adaptations of Shakespeare.