

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Euripides' Trojan Women

Adapted by Rosalba Clement and Dawn Langman

State Theatre Company

Dunstan Playhouse

Reviewed by Murray Bramwell

It is not surprising that the Greek drama speaks so strongly to us now, because it also spoke strongly to its own audience. And none more so than the works of Euripides. His plays confronted the Athenian audience with an unwelcome mirror of its prejudices, its cruelty and its follies. Even such legendary victories as the sacking of Troy Euripides takes as a chance for rebuke and reflection, and an opportunity to see events from another perspective. He was especially interested in seeing what an empire looks like from the other end of the telescope - from the point of view of its victims and its vanquished.

In *The Trojan Women* he returned to themes already explored in *Hecuba*. But in that earlier account of the torments of the widow of Priam, King of Troy, he grants her, at least, the bitter satisfaction of grisly revenge for the deaths of her children. In *The Trojan Women* the text is on suffering - for women, children, even, for the souls of the victors. Its subject is the death that can be worse than death - occupation and enslavement.

In her final project as Artistic Director for State Theatre, Rosalba Clemente has collaborated with Dawn Langman to stage a work that is difficult in theme and form. The play is a lament, a tableau with little in the way of plot and dramatic complexity. For this Clemente has gathered a cast of more than seventy, including a women's chorus of sixty. Designer Mark Shelton has used light to sculpt, not only the imposing space of the Playhouse stage, but the many and various forms of the cast members as well. With minimal set - a platform for the soldiers at the back of the stage and a raised level for the five musicians - it is the querulous spotlights that accompany the menacing soldiers, and the warm, painterly lighting of the chorus, vulnerably dressed in loose brown shifts, that form the visual interest.

This brings problems for the production, however, because, despite choreography by Mia Mason and Clemente's considered staging, the sustained focus on the chorus makes demands on their performance and

movement skills that are too great. The gravity of the play depends on a level of abstraction and simplifying ritual that cannot also accommodate members of the chorus each adding their own interpretation of lamentation.

The task for Dawn Langman as Hecuba is also a challenging one, not only to provide the lead for so many extras but to carry the level of emotion that the text requires. It is a valiant performance but in the latter stages of the production becomes declamatory and, perilously, unmoving. Those with less epic stints on stage fare better. Caroline Mignone, as Andromache, captures a mother's agony at the removal and death of her child, Martha Lott is striking as Helen, the scapegoat for the adventure, Alirio Zavarce plays Talthibius, the soldier who obeys orders, with a weary dread, and Roger Newcombe, astute as Menelaus is the victor rewriting his own justifications. The role of Cassandra, the seer humiliated in capture, is, at times, beyond the reach of the inexperienced Emily Hunt.

The music composed by Philip Griffin and Ross Daly and performed on such bowed string instruments as the lyra, tarhu, saz and oud, adds strong Mediterranean and Balkan accents to the production but is often at odds with the very English carol-like choral compositions also by Philip Griffin.

There is a sense that, in scale and components, as well as the use of an updated often topical text, Rosalba Clemente has loaded her plate too high with this production. Euripides' text and situation are clear enough - civilians suffer in war, and empires at their most tyrannical are ripe to fall. It does not need the adaptors' frequent anachronism and annotations for us to recognise Iraq, Darfur or any other current tragedy. Sometimes not making those links dramatises them more. And drama is what is needed, because for all its ingredients, this production lacks impact. With so many to tell the tale, these Trojan Women have somehow imparted less.