

IN THEATRE, WE ARE ALL GREEKS

Greek theatre is more popular than ever. After a year of sell-out Greek tragedies and with a season of Greek plays to come, **Edith Hall** asks, what is going on?



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Juliette Binoche as Antigone

We have become so accustomed to seeing Greek tragedy in our public theatres that it is easy to forget how strange and wonderful it is that these ancient plays still work two and a half millennia after they premiered. Dramas set in the Bronze Age, written in a polytheist, pagan, slave-holding patriarchy, in an ancient form of the Greek language which today even Greeks need to study if they are to understand, miraculously still enthral modern audiences. Over the last nine months, Greek tragedies have sold out at four major London venues alone - Euripides' *Medea* at the National Theatre, Sophocles' Theban plays in a new operatic version at the ENO, his *Electra* at the Old Vic, and his *Antigone* at the Barbican. Just what is going on?

Diana Quick, who recently played a dignified and eloquent Clytemnestra to Kristin Scott Thomas's *Electra*, directed by Ian Rickson at the Old Vic, told me in 2001 that it was the lack of interesting roles for women protagonists in the theatre repertoire that made Greek tragedy so appealing to female actors today. No roles equivalent in power and emotional complexity to *Medea*, *Electra*, or *Clytemnestra* in the *Oresteia* became available until Ibsen and Chekhov; even the role of Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* pales into insignificance, at least in terms of the proportion of the play which is truly 'hers', when compared with her Greek forebears. It was probably just a matter of word getting round in feminist theatre circles before world-class women actors like Scott Thomas and Juliette Binoche (the star of *Antigone* at the Barbican) started to seek out opportunities to play Greek mythical heroines. Scott Thomas told me that she had decided to play *Electra* years ago, in 1998, after seeing Zoë Wanamaker shine in the role in New York.

These women want to stretch themselves, their technical skills and

their art; the challenge of keeping an audience enraptured through 90 or so minutes of intense rhetoric and shifting psychological registers inevitably appeals to an experienced performer who may feel her roles have been limited to impersonating 'safer', often bourgeois characters in more modern contexts. Scott Thomas said recently in an interview about *Electra* that she was heartily sick of plays with 'teacups'.

And plays with roles which can tempt stars with Hollywood form into treading the boards are obviously going to appeal to the artistic directors and commercial managers who determine which plays to produce each season. A name like Helen McCrory (the Medea of the National), who appeared in two Harry Potter films before starring in *Hugo* (2011) and *Skyfall* (2012), guarantees a successful run in financial terms; her work in television has also made her a very popular figure nationally. In the cases of both Scott Thomas and Binoche, we are talking international movie superstardom.

These challenging female roles, of course, were in antiquity performed by male actors in female masks. At their premieres in the Athenian theatre of Dionysus in the fifth century BC, the audiences will also have been exclusively or predominantly male. Since women were excluded from performing in the theatre and from most aspects of Athenian public life, it is something of a paradox that they were so conspicuous in this most public of Athenian art-forms.

Various explanations of the paradox are customary. Women's role in religion, especially in lamentation and sacrifice, must partly explain their presence in a genre where death and killing are central focuses. Others see the Dionysiac origin of tragedy as an explanation for the emphasis on the feminine: maenadic frenzy often occurs in metaphors associated with kin-killing in tragedy because of its affiliation with the cult of Dionysus. There was certainly transvestism in the cult of the theatre-god Dionysus, and symbolic gender inversions in Greek ritual to help to explain the role of women as the 'other' of the masculine self which is truly at stake in the theatre. But I suspect that the most important explanation is that women were regarded as more susceptible to invasive passions than men, and thus women were particularly plausible vehicles through which to explain the occurrence of tragic events, and particularly effective in the generation of emotional responses in the audiences.

Sadly, I was left curiously cold by the Barbican *Antigone*, directed by the



© Johan Persson

Kristen Scott Thomas as Electra



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Helen McCrory as Medea

Belgian darling of Dutch theatre Ivo van Hove. It is slow, stately, and thrilling visually, but just did not make me feel that a vulnerable teenage girl was risking her life by standing up to a terrifying uncle with absolute power over her people. On the night I went, at least, the ponderous vocal delivery took all the edge and suspense out of the confrontational scenes between Creon and his interlocutors. These are heart-stopping if delivered in a tauter, more dynamic rhythm. Just because the performance text is ancient Greek tragedy, and even if it has international superstars acting and directing, it does not always mean that it will produce excellent theatre. There is a strange, indefinable ingredient which turns the live enactment of a script into a thrilling experience, and sometimes no directorial or acting efforts can produce it. The performance just does not gel.

My only personal involvement in the *Antigone* was writing the programme essay, but I was lucky enough to contribute actively, in a small way, in the National Theatre *Medea*. I met McCrory more than once to discuss the script, but would not for a minute take any credit for this production's brilliance in performance. Director Carrie Cracknell allowed McCrory full rein to prowl the stage, hissing sardonic humour and menace, stunning everyone who saw her. There was never a dull moment in

this musical and emotional rollercoaster, with its sinister set, gorgeous child actors and exquisitely dressed, balletic chorus. The climax, when McCrory dragged the sacks containing the little corpses of her sons into the woods behind her house, was electrifying. The Old Vic *Electra*, on which I was official consultant to the director, was very different: intense, at times transfixing, and deeply intellectual. Performing Greek tragedy 'in the round' is a staggering directorial challenge, and Rickson did not put a foot wrong. The timeless, poetic ambience he created was very much to my taste, although some spectators found it overly dry and austere.

Women were regarded as more susceptible to invasive passions than men

So after the year of three divas, what is there for fans of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to look forward to now? The artistic director of the Almeida Theatre in Islington, Rupert Goold, has announced a whole season of Greek tragedies, *Oresteia*, *Medea*, and *Bacchae*. The *Oresteia* will also be running, in a new version distilling all three plays

of the trilogy into one production, at Shakespeare's Globe. My only disappointment here is that we seem to be stuck in a bit of a repertoire rut: there are 30 surviving Greek tragedies, few of which are ever performed, and it would be wonderful to see avant-garde directors looking at some of the other texts. Aeschylus' stormy, war-themed *Seven against Thebes* is crying out for a new appraisal, as is Euripides' *Suppliant Women*. And when have we ever been offered an *Iphigenia in Tauris*? Artistic Directors take note: the world-class poet Tony Harrison has written a wonderful new version, set in Crimea, that has yet to see its first performance. I am thrilled by the resurgence of the masterpieces of ancient theatre, but would be ecstatic to see a bit more of an adventurous spirit shown by theatre managers in drawing up their plans next season.

*Oresteia runs from
29 May - 18 July,*

*Bakkhai runs from
23 July - 19 September,*

*Medea runs from
25 September - 14 November,
at The Almeida Theatre*

*Oresteia runs at The Globe from
29 August - 16 October*