

Liz White is an actor who has appeared in a wide variety of roles on stage and in film and television. One of her most recent film roles was in *Pride* (2014) directed by Marcus Warchus. Among her other film roles, Liz has played Pamela in *Vera Drake* (2004) directed by Mike Leigh, and she starred as the eponymous woman in the 2012 film version of *The Woman in Black*, based on the novel by Susan Hill. For BBC Television, Liz played WPC/WDC Annie Cartwright in *Life on Mars* (2006/7), Caroline in the adaptation of *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2011), and Lizzie Mottershead in the series *Our Zoo* (2014). Other television roles have been Eileen in *Teachers* (2003), Jess Mercer in *The Fixer* (2008), and Lucille in *The Paradise* (2013). Liz's stage credits have included three acclaimed performances at the National Theatre. She played Heavenly Critchfield in Laurie Sansom's production of *Spring Storm* by Tennessee Williams, which transferred from the Royal and Derngate, Northampton, to the Cottesloe (2010), Anne Frankford in *A Woman Killed With Kindness* by Thomas Heywood, directed by Katie Mitchell in the Lyttelton (2010), and double roles in Marianne Elliot's revival of *Port* by Simon Stephens in the Lyttelton (2013). In Autumn, 2014, Liz played the role of Chrysothemis in Ian Rickson's production of Sophocles' *Electra* at the Old Vic Theatre. The production used the version of the play written by Frank McGuinness and starred Kristin Scott Thomas as Electra.

In this interview, recorded by Chrissy Combes at the Old Vic Theatre on Thursday 11 December 2014, Liz talked about the experience of playing Chrysothemis, Electra's sister.

Quotations are taken from Sophocles' *Electra* in the version by Frank McGuinness.

An illustrated version of this interview is available on the *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Studies* website: <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2015/white>

CC. Today I am backstage at the Old Vic Theatre, and I am talking to the actor Liz White. Liz is playing the role of Chrysothemis in the current production of Sophocles' *Electra*, directed by Ian Rickson, and using the version of the play written by Frank McGuinness. Hello Liz, and thank you very much for making time to talk to me today.

LW. Hello Chrissy. It's an absolute pleasure.

CC. Liz, you have a glittering CV and you are a very well known face, a well known actor. But this is your debut at the Old Vic, isn't it?

LW. Yes, it's my first time here.

CC. You have worked with extraordinary directors, and Ian Rickson, who directs this production, is another distinguished and very gifted director. Could I just ask you what your first responses were when you knew you were going to play Chrysothemis in this company and under his direction?

LW. I was incredibly excited, and daunted by the task ahead. Kristin is one of my favourite actresses of all time. I've only ever seen her on screen, and when I knew ever that she was in a production in London onstage I just assumed that I wouldn't be able to get a ticket so I never even tried, which is, I think, a mistake a lot of people probably make, to the detriment of box office sales! But I was really excited as well because Peter Wight (who plays the Servant) I know had championed me a little bit to Ian because we had worked together on *Our Zoo*, and only about a month before I had auditioned for a different production that Ian was going to direct called *The River*, and that didn't work out but he had said 'I would like to work with you.' And then this opportunity came up. And I had to make quite a quick decision. I had never performed in any Greek tragedy, nor had I studied it. So I had to make sure that I read the play and thought that I could do it. And so I did, I said 'I've got to go and read this.' And as soon as I read it – it was so accessible. Frank's adaptation, particularly, just felt so clear and present and prescient that I thought, Yes, I'd love to do it.' And I was really attracted to the role of Chrysothemis.

CC. There is a terrific production team for this show. And, as well as Kristin Scott Thomas starring in the central role, and Peter Wight (The Servant/Tutor) and yourself as Chrysothemis, there are other

great actors in this production, aren't there? Ian Rickson has drawn a fabulous acting company together with Diana Quick as Clytemnestra, Jack Lowden as Orestes, Tyrone Huggins as Aegisthus. And there are three lovely actresses for the chorus (Julia Dearden, Golda Rosheuvel and Thalissa Teixeira).

LW. Oh, the chorus are amazing. They are wonderful. They'd had a week to rehearse before the rest of the company came in, to consolidate what the role of the chorus should be, how they should react to Electra and her mother, and what their role was in the play and in the world that we were creating. As soon as I started rehearsals – as you say, Kristin is the star, and it's easy to be bewitched by that idea – and then, actually, you go to rehearsals, and credit to Kristin because she mucks in just like everybody else, but also credit to all the cast members that their presence was of equal weight in a way. And the chorus are just phenomenal in their level of concentration and specificity.

CC. When I saw the show I was very impressed by Mark Thompson's design. As I am sure you know, it is believed that in the original Greek theatre the imposing doors were a focus of attention because the dark deeds happened behind and not in front of them. And, when I saw the doors in this production, I felt that the audience could really imagine that Agamemnon was killed behind them, in that palace, and could believe that the matricide was going to take place there, and the murder of Aegisthus. Could you just describe others aspects of the set for us? This is a wonderful show, and because of the great acting company it has had great reviews and people are queuing to get tickets. But, for people who haven't been able to get them, could you describe the setting for us?

LW. Yes, of course. It is as if it is the courtyard outside the great palace. And you imagine it is on the side of the great hill and you can see all of Mycenae around, and Argos. And you have the great doors and then the steps coming down onto the sandy courtyard. And, at the side, you have a standpipe where Electra will take some water from. You imagine it is there for people to clean their boots before they go into the palace. It's not a pretty place, it's not a drinking fountain, but that's where Electra drinks from and eventually that's where Chrysothemis drinks from when she comes back from the tomb. And then, opposite the doors, on the opposite side of the stage, there's a small, round fireplace where Clytemnestra's ritual occurs, where she prays to Apollo. And then, almost opposite the standpipe (it's almost like you've got the north, south, east, west points used on the stage) you've got the tree, an old tree that's lost all its branches, it's just the trunk that remains, and that is almost Agamemnon's presence here in the courtyard. It's where there are tiny little trinkets pinned, they've got little brass plates there and just some old Greek images, faces, images of conflict and war, just tiny little rectangular hanging trinkets. Then there's a nail on the tree where Electra sometimes pins the picture of our father, Agamemnon. And there's a big root that sticks out at the bottom which is perfect to sit on and Electra uses that, and I use that to sit on during one of our arguments. And, round the back of the tree, there's a hollow in the trunk where there are some little rocks. Ian and Kristin went to Mycenae and you could buy pieces of the original palace in the gift shop there, and they bought a few pieces and they are down there amongst the rubble, just as a sign of some authenticity. And, sometimes that's where Electra keeps Agamemnon's photograph, as well. And that's it. So you've got the four things: the doors, the trunk, the fireplace and the standpipe.

CC. It struck me, the setting, as being extraordinarily elemental, with the four elements there. You had the fire, as you say, and Electra brought on a votive lantern, didn't she? And then there was the water, and then that earth, the stone, the rubble of the earth. And then, when Electra came on, her first words are about the air. It seemed that a very elemental, kind of visceral atmosphere was created through that set, which was remarkable. When the doors opened for the exits and entrances could anybody see anything in, could the audience see anything inside, from any angle?

LW. No, it's all blacked up in there. So that it looks as if there's a very dark entrance hall to this enormous, terrifying palace.

CC. The simple, uncluttered set really served Frank McGuinness's translation which is very clear, as you have said, very pared down. And, of course, the in-the-round configuration (integral to the Old Vic's 'In the Round' season) makes the actor and audience relationship very intimate. And, regarding the choices made by the director, there seems to be no attempt by Ian Rickson to reconstruct the past and stage the play in the way it is thought it might have been staged originally. There is no stylisation,

no masks, and the acting style is very naturalistic. Kristin Scott Thomas's interpretation of Electra is extremely raw and exposed, her longing for Orestes, her passion for revenge on Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, her pathological grief and rage, are all conveyed with passionate intensity. And, of course, the chorus of women from Mycenae, the sympathetic advisors to Electra, are reduced to three and have individual characteristics. Did Ian Rickson set out his intentions regarding a naturalistic approach at the start of the rehearsal process?

LW. Well I came into the rehearsal process late, I missed the first rehearsals. And I auditioned late. So when I did first read it with Kristin, it was just Ian and I and Kristin and we just read those scenes. And I read it in my own accent the first time.

CC. You're from Rotherham?

LW. I'm from Rotherham, originally. And then Devon for ten years. So it's a bit of a hotchpotch. And then Liverpool, and I've worked a lot in Manchester, so, really, my accent sort of sways in between these different areas and vernaculars. But, when I get emotional, it gets a bit more northern. I suppose it takes me back to family arguments!

CC. And, my goodness, there's plenty of those in this play!

LW. Exactly! Quite right. I was attuned to the familial aspects! But, it was great, because it just meant that the reading was really fluid, and that it didn't, in any way, feel constrained by an actor trying to be something that they weren't, it was an honest read. And then, once we'd done that, Ian said, 'Would you mind taking it being a bit more RP?' [Received Pronunciation] because he wanted the family to sound as if they were from the same place. And although *A Woman Killed with Kindness* [NT production, 2013, directed by Katie Mitchell] was RP, Katie was really fluid about that, so this was the first time anybody had said, 'Can you do it?' And, you know, Kristin has got a very clear voice, and so has Diana, but, actually, I found it easy once I just started, and yet it didn't affect the emotion coming through, and, like you say, it just felt very naturalistic. But friends who have seen it have said because Kristin is so varied and modern in the ways she plays with the words and the language, because she has these huge swathes of text, that's it quite nice when Diana and I come on stage that we do take a slightly more classic shape to our mouths and our dress and our stance, so there is a subtle contrast between us

CC. And did Mark Thompson design the costumes as well?

LW. He did, yes.

CC. I was particularly struck by the costumes of Chrysothemis and Electra. Electra is somebody who obeys the laws of nature, the cosmic laws, whereas you are obeying the laws of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in order to be free, that's what you say. But, because of that, she is treated as a servant really, they treat her quite cruelly, whereas you have some comforts and she says, '*I have no desire to enjoy your privilege.*' Again, would you mind describing the costumes, because I thought the apparel of both really caught the choices that these two sisters make as to how to live their lives.

LW. Electra's costume: I think the idea is that once it had been a lot nicer but she's been wearing it for so many years and refuses to change it. So, it's a much thinner material than mine and it's got quite square shoulders that go down to a sort of box sleeve half way up her arms. And it's very grey and it's got sweat patches that are ingrained into the material. And a very old, worn, embroidered braid goes around the bottom and around the collar, with a slight dip back at the collar. So you have this very classic Greek idea, there's something that you assimilate with a classic Greek shape about it, and yet you can't quite put it to a time. And then she wears these really thin cotton trousers underneath, rolled up, so that, again, she is not subscribing to gender specific clothes, and she can roll up her dress and blow her nose on her dress and pull it up to her chest as she does sometimes, and she isn't going to expose herself, she can roll around on the floor. And, I think that the idea is that she does live in the palace, but whereas I have a room with a bed and curtains, she just assigns herself away to this little square box room where you would keep an animal. Because she doesn't want to partake in any trade with the house, with her mother or Aegisthus, she doesn't want to receive anything from them so that she doesn't owe them anything. Whereas Chrysothemis instead will wear

what she's asked to wear. Because she's vying for her freedom and she thinks that the more she toes the line the more she'll be allowed to go off and meet someone or meet a suitor should he come to the house, but I don't think that would ever happen, unfortunately. So my dress is a really beautiful almost royal or midnight blue tunic dress that comes down to the ankles, and, again, it's got a very beautiful embroidered braid around the bottom and around the bust line. It's got a very deep cut cleavage and I wear a big gold necklace that hangs down to cover some modesty, but not all that much, I don't think! And with the gold braid under the bust line, it's like an empire line dress and it just hugs the figure in an A line without revealing too much shape but I think it's a very flattering slim line dress, very elegant. Oh, and I have sandals on and Kristin has bare feet. And she has cuts all over her body and my skin's clean and white. She's weathered by life. The costumes show that Chrysothemis is being pragmatic and prudent in order to survive while Electra is constantly lamenting her father and calling out for vengeance on his killers in public, which is so dangerous. In my first scene with Electra, I admit that she has justice on her side and I do not. Yet I urge Electra to appear to be compliant for her own safety. But Electra absolutely turns on me.

CC. You have the two scenes with Electra and the chorus are always there, aren't they? And they are Electra's sympathisers. But does it change? Do they sympathise with you at any point?

LW. Yes, I feel that they really do, you know. Whenever Electra and I are together, in every argument we have. In the first scene, when Electra says to me, '*You have betrayed your dead father. You have betrayed your own.*' the chorus quickly interject by saying to her, '*Please, say nothing in anger. There's wisdom on both sides. Learn from her, and she learns from you.*' And then, equally, in the second scene, when Electra is trying to persuade me to kill Aegisthus, before I can say anything, the chorus say, '*In matters like these it's wise to be cautious.*' I think they realise absolutely that Chrysothemis has strength and persuasion, a good level head. And they try to appeal to that.

CC. To some extent, I suppose, Sophocles created the role of Chrysothemis as a kind of a foil, a contrast to Electra and her passion, so that the original audience could weigh up both sides of the arguments they have. You see a similar relationship in the *Antigone*, in the argument between Antigone and her sister, Ismene. But modern rehearsal techniques will always explore the history, the inner life of a character. Did you do a back story to Chrysothemis? What did you find out?

LW. Yes, well, the dates are a bit blurred, but we estimated that Chrysothemis was about seven when Agamemnon was killed in this story, in this world that we've created. And so she was in that very difficult middle child phase whereby she wasn't the most informed but she was left to do most of the guesswork. She was the most alone in some ways. Because, although Electra has greater conflict with her mother, Chrysothemis is stuck in this middle ground where she daren't, she can't be the voice of argument because Electra has already taken that place. And so she has to be the voice of reason. And so she doesn't win favour with Electra and she doesn't win much favour with her mother, Clytemnestra, because it's all on Clytemnestra's terms, you see. We did some improvisations in the house and it was as if Chrysothemis is kept as a sort of pet, in a way, to do what her mother asks her to do, to obey, to look good, to curry favour with visitors, but she would never gain the advantage that she herself would accrue if she was doing it by herself. And really Electra is her only friend, her only ally in this secret that she carries. She does hold an enormous amount of pain about what happened to her father and the fact that her mum is with Aegisthus, who is a hugely domineering figure. Whichever way she turns, the door is shut in her face and she is constantly frustrated.

CC. And Electra is the principal character who refuses absolutely to listen to your advice. In both your scenes with Electra, the argument is really vehement. You both start with the long speech in which you each set out your case, and then there is the *stichomythia*, the quick crossfire of short lines, one against the other. Did you work a lot on the pace of these tense arguments?

LW. We didn't necessarily look at the pace in itself but we did, for a long time, try to work out what was going on. In both scenes, there are quite similar lines. Basically, the sisters are asking each other who has the power in the predicament they are in. Chrysothemis pushes for reason, for logic and sense, all the time. She says that Electra's life would be more bearable if she used some logic. To quote from the text:

Electra: *And is it your logic to be disloyal to my own?
Is that what you teach me?*

Chrysothemis: *I am not trying to teach you that,
But to bow the knee to those in power.*

Electra: *You can bow the knee, I will stand upright.*

Chrysothemis: *Honour demands you do not come to grief through being stubborn & stupid.*

I always feel that they're arguing about how they were brought up, they're trying to correct each other on what Agamemnon stood for. In that dialogue I've just quoted, Electra goes on to say that she will defend her father's honour even if she has to come to grief. And then Chrysothemis says '*But our father does not demand this. He will forgive us this. I know.*' She is thinking very logically, while Electra is thinking instinctively and passionately, she lives by the ancient rules of revenge.

Chrysothemis is prepared to compromise. But Electra thinks that a compromised life isn't worth living. She calls me a coward. And even when I warn her about the great danger she is facing from Aegisthus, the fact that he is going to banish her and wall her up in a dungeon, she is defiant, she almost laughs in my face.

CC. In performance, do the arguments change at all from night to night?

LW. Oh yes, there are subtle changes. And last night we did a performance where something really new happened. Ian had said to Kristin that he wanted to see a bit more love coming from Electra towards Chrysothemis and Clytemnestra because if that were to happen then Electra could believe that she still has a chance to change their minds and get an army behind her. So that's what I expected to happen when I went out on stage. And I was doing my normal preparation, which is when I am stood behind the palace doors where the audience can't see me, I'm waiting to come in – the idea is that that morning our mother had got up, having had this terrible dream about Agamemnon. I'd been told about it by a gardener, who saw her praying to the sun. And then Clytemnestra came to me and gave me all these offerings to take to my father's tomb. And I always know that there's something wrong when I have to go to my father's tomb because I am the only one who's allowed to go there, so it's both a privilege and a curse – I'm always doing errands for Clytemnestra. I sort of feel like I'm breaking the rules but obeying the rules at the same time. And I've been given this other secret. I know about the dream and I know that my mother is scared. And I've also overheard Clytemnestra and Aegisthus arguing with each other that they're going to send Electra away, that they're going to banish her. And again, it's this massive secret that I'm carrying. So, I'm carrying all this and I'm preparing myself backstage for this, and then I go onto the stage and say: '*What are you saying outside the house? After so long lamenting, will you not learn you are wasting your time?*' 'Please will you do this for me! Listen to me. Listen to me.....' And Electra (Kristin) just, you know, perfectly naturally, started rolling her eyes at the chorus, looking at the sky, basically ignoring everything I had to say. And I got so frustrated, I charged over to her, grabbed her shoulders, and shook her. And I said my line: '*I know you have justice on your side, and I do not. But they have power.*' And I was so scared about telling her the truth which is 'If you don't listen to me – this is serious – you're going to *die*.' But feeling that if I told her that I was putting us both in jeopardy, and, of course, like any other human being, at the end of the day it's my own survival that I care most about. I love the fact that we're three months into the run, and you can find these things. For the first time I felt that I had reached the stakes of that initial argument, that initial speech that Chrysothemis has. Which is 'today's the day.' And we'd always rehearsed saying that no one should touch Electra because she is this feral creature in the house and she is untouchable. But, again, the play is about, 'The day has come. The day has come. For vengeance to occur. The day has come for this to be brought to the table.' And, I think, that's the same for every character. So Clytemnestra reaches the point where she can say, without limit, to Electra, 'When Aegisthus comes home, I'm going to set him on you.' And I can say to Electra, 'If you don't behave, you've lost me.' So it was really exciting! And Kristin was brilliant, she was brilliant. She was really shocked. And then, when she has her argument back to me, when she picks apart everything that I've said to her, she started to rationalise her behaviour to me, and then she started to plead with me to try and say, 'Look, if you continue to live in that house, if you continue to obey our mother, you're being disloyal to your father.' And my counter argument is, 'I'm not trying to be disloyal, I'm just trying to say these are the powers that we

are living under at the moment.’ And then she says to me ‘You’re a traitor.’ And then I say to her, ‘Well then, you don’t understand, you’re going to be banished.’ And so we have this ‘to and fro’. And then I have to give in, because she sends me away and I say that I’m going to my father’s grave and then, of course, her attention is pricked, she wants to know why.

CC. With regard to the libations, what was actually in your tray? I was intrigued to know.

LW. We had some herbs, some sage and some thyme, some milk, some oil, some incense and some candle papers. All the traditional elements were incorporated.

CC. It is a typical scenario in Greek tragedy that discord and violent events occur when the man of the house is away from home. And in this play discord erupts between the women in the family while Aegisthus is absent. Your first argument with Electra is followed by her ferocious argument with Clytemnestra, during which Electra conveys her hostility towards her mother and her unwavering loyalty to her murdered father. Electra says her mother has no excuse for having killed Agamemnon and no excuse for her adulterous relationship with Aegisthus. If your scene with Electra has been about power, this scene between Electra and Clytemnestra is about justice. And, again, in the *agon* you can hear the opposing arguments. Clytemnestra justifies her actions, saying the reason why Agamemnon was murdered was her daughter, Iphigenia, was murdered by him. Did the company talk about this whole issue of who you side with, who has right on her side?

LW. They did talk about it. They did, a lot, and a lot more before I joined the company. Diana worked very hard, I think, at really proving the case to herself and then, to the audience, that she had no choice, she had to take revenge for Iphigenia’s death. And when my mum came to see the play she said to me: ‘Fancy killing your own daughter, what kind of man would do that?’ You can understand Clytemnestra. And then, when Agamemnon came home from Troy after ten years, he even brought home his concubine – Cassandra. So, when you put it in context, how could Clytemnestra, as a wife and a mother, have behaved any differently? But then, Electra can say: ‘But as a daughter, I lost my sister and I lost my dear father, and you are for bedding my father’s murderer.’ So, you can fully understand Electra’s viewpoint too. I don’t know if this is too big a claim but, for me, Electra is an extraordinarily modern woman. This play is the earliest text I have read about a woman’s pain. It’s a pain we can relate to. We can relate to Electra’s pain and to the pain of her mother and sister as well. That’s what I love about the play. People think that Greek tragedy is just something based on myth, something really old, the way they did things ‘back then’. But that’s not true. I was recently reading a book called ‘Falling Into the Fire’ written by an American psychiatrist, and one of the cases discussed related to matricide. Apparently, in America in one year (during the past ten years), there were 91 cases of matricide. And you read these reports in the news and you think that these people are mad or evil. We hear reports all the time of people who have – very sadly – killed their children, or their parents or their siblings. These furies are part of the human condition and will forever be.

CC. That is really interesting, Liz. Just going back a little bit – you referred to Peter Wight, as the Servant/Tutor. A lovely moment in the production was that great, very famous chariot speech, which he delivered beautifully. But, scholars have sometimes said about that speech that it is really daring, perhaps odd, in terms of the plot. There is this fictional death of Orestes which is recounted.

LW. I remember Frank [McGuinness] coming in and saying that the Servant is a really erudite man and would have taught Orestes a lot. And this, really, is sort of his opportunity to show off a little bit. He’s taken the reins and run with it, as it were. And, also, what if Orestes (like *Cyrano de Bergerac*) was listening in? So he can show off to Orestes how skilfully he can do it. ‘You want me to create a foil, a smoke screen? Ok, you just watch me to do this.’ And Peter does it so convincingly. There’s great dramatic irony and also, I think it’s to add another twist in the tale. If the audience loses their concentration for a minute they might really start to believe that Orestes is actually dead. And identify with Electra’s grief.

CC. You say you can relate to Electra’s despair and pain. What about Chrysothemis? Do you like Chrysothemis? Does she like herself, do you think? Does Chrysothemis like herself?

LW. That’s a good question. I feel that she does. Because in her final words, she says to Electra, ‘*If you think you’re wise, then so be it. Your heart will soon be sore you didn’t hear my words.*’ I think

she finally feels that she's got some power and she's let go of all the co-dependence that she felt she needed to have with Electra. Because Electra is actually very cruel to Chrysothemis. And I really like the journey that Chrysothemis goes on. That's what first attracted me when I said I really liked the role of Chrysothemis. At first, I really identified with Electra when I read it. I'd love to play Electra. Obviously. But, I thought that Chrysothemis's conviction matched her sister's, and so I thought they were both equally strong. And in the second scene she tries to say to Electra, '*Orestes is here*' and the only evidence she has is that she felt it in her soul. Which is such a strong thing to declare, and her instincts are true. She says, '*And there at the grave's edge – a fresh-cut lock of hair. And my soul knew - it saw Orestes.*'

CC. And then you spoke about the one you were longing to see.

LW. Yes. '*An omen, a sign from the one I love most in this world. I took it in my hands, I couldn't speak, My eyes were crying tears of joy.*' You know, it's this beautiful image, and it's just so pure and honest. And then when she comes out and she sees that Orestes is actually here, nobody says: 'Well done, you were right!' She's just ignored. And there's no space even for Orestes to recognise that his other sister is there, it's just the great Electra that everybody's heard of. So Chrysothemis really is an unsung hero.

CC. I think that's such a good point to make about her. Electra, when you think about her, she's such a typical Sophocles hero or heroine. She's uncompromising and she's passionate and she's obsessive and she says, all the time, that she suffers alone. And when you said that line about the one you were longing for, the one you loved most in the world, I was so moved by that because you really brought home to me, in the audience, that this girl has also lost her father, she's also lost Iphigenia, her sister, she's also living under the injustice and the tyranny of Aegisthus, and she's also longing to see her brother. I was so moved by that, by the way you did that, spoke that.

LW. Oh, thank you. And her only friend, her only ally, is Electra, you see. And you get those little glimmers. Actually, the more we do it, the more I am on stage as Chrysothemis, I find I can really hear Electra when she says, '*My dear sister*' and sometimes I think, 'Oh, you tease!' And then other times I hear Electra's defences drop, like when she says, '*You are my sister, I need a sister's help.*' I find that really moving and think, 'Oh, my God, she's realised.' Two are better than one in Chrysothemis's eyes. If she could recruit Electra, she would not only be taming Electra and saving her from the wrath of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, but they would find strength in each other to survive and eventually, hopefully, escape.

CC. But of course, in your second scene, Electra is trying to recruit you, Chrysothemis, to enlist your help in murdering Aegisthus, an idea from which you recoil in absolute horror.

LW. Yes. I try to persuade her to see reason again, pointing out that as women we would be no match for the strength of Aegisthus. But she won't listen to any of it. I realise she is deaf to all my arguments, she's becoming abusive again, and I leave her.

CC. And then there is the reappearance of Orestes and further dramatic irony in Electra's despair over the urn and her tussle with Orestes and the chorus when they try to take the urn away from her.

LW. Yes, that's a very painful scene for the audience to watch.

CC. Jack Lowden as Orestes, gave another really wonderful performance. Again, you have, in terms of Sophocles' plot, this really strange thing where Orestes comes on, he brings the urn on, supposedly with the ashes, and Electra is in such despair over that. And then you have a very moving recognition scene – which, again, was beautifully played. But, something that struck me about this production was that there was real humour in their happiness. Is that something that Ian Rickson wanted – to lighten the mood occasionally?

LW. Again, I'm not sure whose idea it was. But I know that if Ian would have seen a glimmer of humour in the rehearsal, he would have gone with it. He doesn't just seek different tones for the sake of it but he wants to find every thread in the tapestry and every different colour and explore it, and then change it or allow for something new. He has this great phrase where he says: 'I love that. Put it in your pocket. And let's just try this.' So that you are constantly searching. And we had a really long

rehearsal period, really. We had six or seven weeks and we had a holiday week in between. I can't remember who, but somebody had a personal arrangement before they got the job, that they couldn't change. So that left everybody with a week off. Which, actually, was a luxury, because your subconscious is allowed to work when you're off and things just rise to the surface or sink if they're not needed, and then you come back feeling completely refreshed, and the really useful bits, hopefully, have stayed with you. But again, Kristin and Jack were really inventive in discovering the ways in which you feel a person, you bring a person to reality, like, you smell them, you find an opportunity to touch them, their hair, their skin, their clothes. How does it all feel? What does their voice sound like? All the senses being awakened to this new person. We also have the company warm up every night at 6.30 and Julia Dearden, one of the chorus, gave us this lovely exercise where you imagine that you are picking up something that has your favourite smell. It could be lavender, it could be Imperial Leather soap, it could be a bunch of roses, whatever you want it to be. You bend down, pick it up, and inhale it. And you feel the air going into the back of your lungs and it's literally like the first breath you've taken all year. That's how it feels. And when I watched Kristin and Jack working on that scene, when she smells the back of his neck, it looked as if she was smelling her favourite smell. And it was one that she had not smelled for twenty years.

CC. The joy in that recognition scene was immensely touching, and the laughter lightened the mood before the action led inexorably to the murder of Clytemnestra by her own son. I wonder if the company talked at all about what Sophocles might have been saying in terms of the play's moral issue? Electra is calling out when Clytemnestra is being murdered: '*Strike her again*' which is very shocking. And Aegisthus asks at the end whether the killing is going to go on forever, this endless circle of violence. Sophocles, a well known and respected public figure, was writing a play that was deeply disturbing. What do you think he was saying about the primitive laws of vengeance?

LW. Well, I'm not sure. But in performance, when Clytemnestra has been murdered, the siblings are just left onstage with the body. And you realise, almost immediately, that now Clytemnestra is dead and there's no argument to have anymore, there's all that sorrow and all that loss, and it's the double loss now because they no longer have a father and they no longer have a mother. And how can Electra exorcise that pain? Once you have had your revenge, what does it leave you with? I think that's what Sophocles is saying.

CC. In this production, Chrysothemis was onstage at the ending of the play, wasn't she?

LW. Yes, Ian was great when we were rehearsing. In Sophocles' text, and in Frank's version of the text, Chrysothemis doesn't appear again after her two scenes with Electra. She's just in the house and she's never mentioned. But we decided that she runs out of the house while the killing of Clytemnestra is going on. And, so, in fact, when the chorus say, '*Children of Atreus, Your suffering has ended*' it makes even more sense, when that is addressed to Electra and Chrysothemis both onstage, while Orestes is inside the house, killing Aegisthus. And, in our production, Electra goes to look at Clytemnestra's body. And she gets Agamemnon's photograph from the tree and she puts it in the shroud with the dead body, which is really moving. She shows the dead body of Clytemnestra the photograph of Agamemnon as if to say: 'Look at the man you killed, Mother.' And, standing there as Chrysothemis, I can't watch such cruelty, and I can't bear the pain of losing my mother.

CC. You identify very strongly with Chrysothemis. Will you be sorry to let Chrysothemis go?

LW. Oh, really sorry, actually. Discovering that new thing last night, and who knows what we'll do tonight....? Ian really has set us up in a production where we're pretty free now to discover new things all the time. I wrote him an email today saying that last night for the first time I felt that I was scaling the edges of the text instead of just staying in the middle somewhere. I felt that something in that speech had really opened up to me and I'd found the walls, you know. It was just that initial speech that I felt a bit stuck in because there's so much sub text, there's so much she holds back on saying. It's all about having to toe the line, they are in dangerous waters. But she's not being clear. She doesn't come out and say, 'Will you be quiet! You have no idea what's going on. They've said to me that they are going to send you away!' She just hopes that Electra will say: 'Oh, ok then.'! But I find that the more stoic that Chrysothemis can be, the more it diminishes the strength of Electra's arguments. Chrysothemis just has to keep being very strong.

CC. Honestly, my final question. I know that when actors are playing a role, they are doing their job. But does it take its toll, being in a play of this nature, with such a grim theme?

LW. I think undoubtedly it does. However, I do feel that I have respite from it sewn into my night's work because I go onstage about fifteen minutes later than most of the cast, and then I have that initial scene, and then I come offstage for about fifteen minutes, then I go back on, and then I come off for about fifteen minutes and then I go back on at the end. So, it's not one continuous marathon I have to run, it's just these little sprints, and I get to feel the energy, and I get to play around, and then I get to come back and just defuse it a little bit. So, I feel it looks after me in that way. And also, often as an actor you have to work away from home, but actually I live about twenty minutes down the road, I'm home pretty early, and it's not a three and a half hour show, so it sort of takes care of you. We all feel for Kristin because she has to go on that journey every night and it's an incredibly taxing one. And I think she has been through real undulations regarding how it makes her feel. I think, in the beginning, it was so cathartic, she just always felt better after she'd done it. It's almost relief, I think. And then there's times when it's the second matinee of the week, and you're just exhausted, you just feel a bit spent. But then Doctor Theatre arrives and you get onstage and you do it and then you come home and you rest. I think when you're playing a part like that, it is important that you remember, in the hours when you're not at work, to rest and eat and look after yourself.

CC. Liz, thank you very much for talking to me. I know this will be of enormous interest to *PVCRS* readers. Naturally, a great deal has been written about the beautiful character of Electra, whose intensity of feeling drives the play. But, it has been really fascinating today to examine the role of Electra's sister and to understand more fully that although she is vilified by Electra, Chrysothemis herself is a daughter of the tragic house of Atreus, and is able to feel deeply, in her soul. Thank you for bringing Chrysothemis so clearly into the light, both in your performance and in this discussion.