

## **Staging Ambiguity in *Clytemnestra's Tears***

**An essay by Avra Sidiropoulou (writer and director)**

### **The project**

Although *Clytemnestra's Tears* was originally conceived as a dramatic monologue, the text eventually gave shape to two different projects, one of which was a solo piece and the other a trilingual version starring three actresses who shared the title heroine's part. Initially written in English, the play was first staged as a work-in-progress in the amphitheatre of the New York Public Library in Manhattan, in September 2001, with Kristin Linklater (actress, voice teacher and professor of theatre studies at Columbia University) in the role of Clytemnestra. It was a very powerful evening, only a few days following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the benumbed audience making all the mental connections, while listening to Clytemnestra's anti-war outcry. A few years later, in 2004, the text was re-written in Greek and performed as a one-woman show by Themis Bazaka – a reputable, international-award-winner Greek screen, TV and stage actress, at Dipylon Theatre in Athens. In the meantime, the English version attracted attention in Turkey and there was immediate interest in a translation and a stage reading in Turkish. While rehearsing for the Greek production in Athens, I was invited to Istanbul for a reading by the Turkish actress Derya Durmaz, and was at once struck by the different cultural semiotics in her performance. That was the moment when the idea of a transcultural, trilingual performance was born: the role of Clytemnestra was to be impersonated by three actresses who differed in age, nationality, language and culture, and in their professional training as well. The British-born, New-York-based Kristin Linklater took on the role of the aged, shattered queen, remote and detached; the Greek Themis Bazaka played the mature character at the peak of her passion for murder; and the Turkish actress Derya Durmaz embodied the young, innocent princess, suffering the pangs of love, having just been left behind by a war-thirsty husband. Staging the trilingual production at Tiyatro Oyunevi in Istanbul (2004) and in Northern Greece (Salonika, 2005) was an attempt to put to test the idea that theatre helps transcend linguistic as well as cultural barriers. The production became part of a broader cultural project, entitled *Clytemnestra at Peace: Including our Own 'Other,'* which was funded by the European Union within the Micro-Project Programme for Turkish-Greek Civic Dialogue.

The last stop in Clytemnestra's journey was in 2007, when the solo production travelled back to its place of origin and became part of the La MaMa ETC repertory in New York.

### **Adaptation and Influences**

While *Clytemnestra's Tears* borrows imagery from all three tragic poets, it is not openly indebted to any one of them. The action, for the most part internal, is set within the span of twenty-four hours, on the day Orestes returns to Mycenae to avenge his father's death. During that time, an emotionally weary, dispossessed Clytemnestra reminisces about her past life, revisiting –and actually restaging– its most significant moments, such as her daughter's sacrifice, the Greek army's sailing away to Troy, King Agamemnon's return home and his subsequent death. Clytemnestra's deep existential pain, a 'clean, clear, classical loneliness' (10), is rooted in ambiguity and becomes a fundamental thematic and structural pivot for both text and performance.

Originating from Greek mythology, Clytemnestra has been identified with a creature of unprecedented hatred, ambition and vengeance. The classical literary tradition has made her an emblem of treachery and danger, quite akin in her negative stature to that other female murderess, Medea. In the twentieth century, several versions of the myth have given the legendary transgressor a well-deserved presence.<sup>1</sup> This particular adaptation was one more attempt to rethink a character who has been soaked in hatred and contempt for centuries, a vindication of her voice in theatre scholarship. At the very least, a contemporary play bearing Clytemnestra's name expresses the desire to review the 'vile' heroine from a different angle, the great tragedians never having granted her a title tragedy. While Clytemnestra perpetuates the curse of the house of Atreus, committing outrageous crimes, the need for self-justification marks the beginning of her process of healing, whereby resentment can perhaps transform into compassion, and long-accumulated sentiments of outrage finally be cleansed. Clytemnestra's primal wrath becomes a plea for a voice: to be listened to is to be given a new identity.

All I wanted, Gods, was another history. Won't you give me another history? Yes, I am forgetting! Please Gods, let me forget! Wipe out the memory! Flood the details! Spare me reality! Despise the facts! Change my story! The corpse of love lies rotting inside me. Come help me dig its grave!

### **The Comfort of Mythology**

Myth helps explain both the past and the present, as well as the future, exhibiting timeless patterns and imparting the comfort of archetypes to an audience accustomed to very different cultural heroics. On some very basic level, myths can connect us to a long line of people with whom we share similar needs and anxieties, and, in addition, tackle the extremes of human nature uncompromisingly and without guilt. Embracing myth, directors seem vindicated to explore the 'unsaid' and glimpse at the 'unseen' of the text as well as of the performance. By virtue of the given cultural remoteness, the interpretation of myths frequently verges on ambiguity. Without the tight framework of *au courant* socio-politics, artists may feel less inhibited in their stylistic choices, which in turn accounts for a sharper point of view. When it comes to a play about Clytemnestra, viewed through the lens of tragedy, a disenchanting heroine's immersion into fundamental solitude provides modern audiences with an opportunity for their own private catharsis.

### **Trusting Ambiguity**

The production is orchestrated around moments of ambiguity, taking place, as it does, at the threshold of life and death, consciousness, memory and lived experience. When the performance piece began to emerge, my burning desire was to bring the character to life and simply let her speak. In the texts by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides which address the Atridean myth, the imagery of horror, determination and lack of repentance is profound, and therefore the sources of material to borrow from are many. During the long process of revising the myth, writing the new text and structuring the performance, images flurried by, sounds echoed in torrents, fragments of memories would unexpectedly come to light, necessitating a dramatic shape that could accommodate polysemy. Personal dreams, nightmares and fantasies interweaved with the myth's inherent intrigue and inflammatory

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<sup>1</sup> The most prominent lyrical pieces written in modern Greek in defence of Clytemnestra come from two major male writers: the poet Yiannis Ritsos, in his poetic monologue *Orestes* (1962-66), and the playwright Iakovos Kampanellis, in his one-act play *Letter to Orestes* (1992/93).

context. Indeed these elements – whose combination would surely make for a fortunate dramaturgical mix – required, in order to be put into a workable form, a catalyst, a ‘recipe’ containing the secrets of dosage and proportion, a line of action, a story, a centre, a core.

Gradually, impressions of pure childhood bliss and vicious pain, of sexual lust and paralysing loneliness gave way to a visually uncanny figure, an ageless, androgynous creature at war with her overheated, cavernous brain. The portrayal of the protagonist is slippery and ambiguous: she alternates between a majestic queen and a loathsome misanthrope, a woman in love and a desolate *Jedermann* writhing in existential pain. The very concept of the *mise-en-scène* is based on the idea that the spectators are gradually entering Clytemnestra’s mind, sharing its noise and clutter. For this reason, the distinction between past and present tense is often blurred, while the events of Iphigenia’s sacrifice, the Greeks’ departure to the War, the taking of Aegisthus as a lover, the murder of Agamemnon and the subsequent isolation of Clytemnestra, are given to us in a cyclical form, mixing fact and impression. Delving further and further inside the paranoia of a tortured brain, we too start to question our faculties of perception. The title character switches back and forth in her narration, and it is during those flashbacks that the action becomes more pronounced. For example, when Clytemnestra recounts her times as a young mother, cherishing happy memories of Iphigenia as ‘a tiny little thing dressed in white and blue, black curls and big wondering eyes,’ we see her swinging away forgetfully, using one of the rope ladders that form part of the set. When she arrogantly describes her relationship with Aegisthus, cynically admitting that ‘in the absence of love one makes love out of anything. We all do everything we can to make nothing feel like love,’ she is already placed on the imposing metal staircase, which by now has been transformed into a throne. In sexually-fraught overtones, she also obsessively wraps herself around a long piece of rope during her appeal to Agamemnon. Indeed, the staging of memory mixes psychological detail with ceremonial ritual: Clytemnestra succumbs to the smoldering love-hate emotions for Agamemnon’s ‘manliness persistent. Criminal’ –which clearly battle constantly against her wounded maternal feelings for the sacrificed Iphigenia – by literally performing her desire for him. A cross between a human and its alienated ‘other’ self, Clytemnestra’s persona of fluctuating identities struggles to outbalance the inexorable fixity of characterisation assigned to her by mythology.

### **Building the World of the Play: Setting and Sound**

Drawing on the idea that myths are timeless, rendered eternally contemporary, the key visual and aural elements of the production were essentially abstract. A salient scenic feature on the stage was a prominent metal staircase to the audience’s left, built so that the top steps were increasingly narrower, in order to communicate the impression that the walk up led to nowhere in particular. The rest of the acting area was designated by a multitude of hanging ropes at various lengths, intertwined with rope ladders, which, in ways similar to the disappearing steps, also extended beyond the traditionally defined borders of the stage. The central metaphor of entering a tortured mind was captured in the image of a cavernous cave, walls covered by age-deep mould. To reinforce this sensation, both the stage floor and the hanging ropes were covered in greenish-grey patina. Following similar colour tonalities, the costume was a character of its own: consisting of a regal turquoise taffeta robe with a long tail featuring white scales, it has been repeatedly likened to a reptile’s skin, or a fossil imprint of sorts. In fact, Clytemnestra sheds off her gown at the very final scene of the play, and semi-naked retraces her steps up the staircase, in preparation for the coming of Orestes and her final surrender to death.

The performance's sound-scape was also attuned to the metaphor of the cavernous brain, providing a background of stable unrest, as the monotonous collage of distorted textual snippets was interrupted by occasional buzzing sounds, such as the ones an insect would make (suggesting perhaps a strike of a toxic thought), as well as sounds indicating drops of water dripping from the roof of an ancient cave. At the same time, translating aurally Clytemnestra's terrifying premonition *vis-à-vis* Orestes' impending arrival, the clamour of imagined yet altogether present steps, further punctuated the production's sound-scape. Movement was also heightened and suggestive: the complexity of Clytemnestra's character, defined by grief, righteousness and dignified suffering, was arrested in her physical posture, with the vacillation between tender remembrance and savage determination becoming choreographed: on the one hand, Clytemnestra runs around playing hide-and-seek with her (imaginary) young children and, on the other, prepares the way to Agamemnon's death, creating a kind of deliberate, calculated floor-pattern, a rite of fatal seduction. In general, the performance's physical score incorporated elements of ritual, which emphasised the overall neo-mythical motif: Clytemnestra's physicality was overwhelming and multifarious. Besides reviving the red carpet moment welcoming scene of Agamemnon's arrival, eventually 'dancing him' to death, she also became a windy night in the winter, generating images of snow and frozen darkness through gesture. Underlining the essential character split through movement alone, she descended the stairs like a queen and crawled back up like a pained creature whose identity was no longer known to her, finally staring at us in marked stillness, to indicate the ultimate cancellation of sequential time, after catharsis had been achieved. All in all, the direction opted for a style of minimalism and abstraction, and therefore the conceptualisation of set, costume and sound rested on the inherent ambiguity which informs the process of reviewing conventional representations of character.

### **Shaping Abstraction: A Personal Account**

Each performance is an act of seduction. By re-guiding the spectators' eyes to really look at things that lie undiscovered in some remote corner of their peripheral vision, directors actually aim to redirect the audience's senses to what has not been granted a vociferous presence. Working on *Clytemnestra's Tears* I had to learn how to let go of my selfish indulgence over my 'precious' writing, in order to move from a *perceived* character to an *embodied* situation; to focus on the detail that could reveal the whole; to merge my playwright's voice with my director's imperatives and the actors' instincts; to share my intuitions about a mythical creation and be attentive to the needs of a contemporary audience. More than anything, I struggled to resist the temptation of the sensational image, the handed-down expedient, the sellable product. This was particularly challenging during my frequent encounters with the trite, the clichéd and the literal, screaming for attention like sirens promising a world of comfort, a religion advocating an afterlife of endless reward.

Art can only be relevant in so far as it generates visceral experiences. This is what makes Greek tragedy so strong: travelling through one's eyes and ears, the poetic evocations of absolutes—such as the ones we can only encounter in myth—eventually rest in one's stomach, in the gut as it is, and from there on gradually dissipate well into the person's body, each little particle of image and sound translated into thought and feeling. But a visceral experience, unaccountable and unique as it is, can only be realised in contingency, discontinuity and doubt, for this experience's fundamental expression, feeling, is ultimately an expression of turbulence and of a need for balance. Ambiguity is thus conceived at the point of creation about to be realised, as artistic vision and the outside

world—whether the world of the text, the production’s circumstances and/or the actors’ idiosyncratic particularities— come into fecund intercourse.

At the same time, meaningfulness lies in the artist’s capacity to reactivate memory, a process inadvertently instinctual and blissfully creative: first, directors open themselves up to the material in hand to make it their own, find the personal connection to it and invest it with a vision that is theirs exclusively. After conjuring up its heartbeats, they ‘spread the disease’ to their collaborators, planting the seeds of inspiration by employing strategies of unearthing whatever lurks behind their actors’, designers’, choreographers’ and composers’ only semi-articulated interpretations of the text.

By definition, people hardly ever share the same words, even though they experience the same range of feelings, aroused when memory is triggered. On the other hand, memories – personal and therefore protected to the point of utter inaccessibility– are extremely difficult to penetrate. As a stylistic choice, abstraction, delivering the shifting, yet inviolable elements of human consciousness, can lubricate for an audience the performance’s narrow passage into associative introspection. A linear representation of an imagined truth may at times alienate us – it is too real and yet unreal at the same time. But the suggested, the incomplete, the unutterable, contain a portion of our own reality, because their inner abstract dynamics are linked to an immediate, sensorial perception of the world. In this perspective, abstraction as well as ambiguity, are rarely the products of refined intellectualisation, or the superficial understanding of an ‘outside world’ that has, nonetheless, been squeezed dry by lifeless reproduction.

Traditionally conceived as an archetypically ruthless, conniving character, Clytemnestra has also been portrayed as a victim, ill-fated, as well as traumatised. Concentrating on the more ambiguous aspects of her personal mythology, this production was an attempt to defy, through its very staging, stereotypical interpretation, validating a self which ultimately reconciles the two opposing sides of the spectrum, as she finally stands in front of her audiences naked, empty of everything, but profound desolation:

And this way, somehow, my days do eventually pass.  
Suffering.  
Craving the flesh: the urgency, the persistence, the repetitiveness of the flesh.  
Suffering.  
That way, time passes. Suffering.  
That way, years have passed.  
Longing for, demanding normality. Suffering.  
I make time pass in simply missing the intimacy.

In such perspective, guilt or regret no longer seem relevant; what matters is the gradual surrender to fate, a desire to let go of history and fact to finally seek catharsis in Orestes’ much anticipated arrival. The stark lighting of the final scene of the performance intensifies this profound loneliness, part of the inexorable fixity of all human destiny.

Manipulating parallel realms of association, *Clytemnestra’s Tears* strove to sustain the complex spontaneity and vitality of myth, as well as eliminate the dramaturgical co-ordinates of a linearly formulated narrative. Reversing the traditional elements of communication, it relied on non-semantic physical language, elevating the secondary elements of gesture, pitch, tone, together with the dynamics of sound, image and movement, over the more traditional elements of discursive meaning.

Quite radically abstract, the staging of Clytemnestra's nightmare was layered in indeterminacy and fragmentation. Opening up the audience to inner impressions, ambiguity was embraced as an organic, essential aspect of artistic creation, a faculty which allows for feeling and intuition, the 'unsaid' and the 'unseen' to invade the crevices of a cemented, seemingly truthful, yet ultimately spurious wall of 'reality'. Picasso claimed that creativity is first of all an act of destruction; in my understanding, in any work of art, destruction is part of a process of revision and rebirth. For those great mythical beings to be encountered anew, their timelessness must retain this level of 'truth' which can only materialise beyond the golden cage of instant identification with known patterns. In this respect, the journey of a mythical character through space becomes for any spectator, at any given point in time, a leap into a fascinating 'unknown', a call to surrender to both the past and the present. Directors opting for an abstract style are working from a privileged position, because abstraction can to a certain extent guarantee the dynamic cohabitation of forms and elements –both dramaturgical and aesthetic– pertaining to different time and cultural frames. Within that process, then, what becomes important is the rendering alive of all those slippery, often unfocused, yet clearly visceral mental states. As T.S. Eliot's argued in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent':

The poet's mind is in fact a receptacle for seizing and storing up numberless feelings, phrases, images, which remain there until all the particles which can unite to form a new compound are present together [...] It is not the 'greatness', the intensity, of the emotions, the components, but the intensity of the artistic process, the pressure, so to speak, under which the fusion takes place, that counts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Eliot, T.S. *The Sacred Wood*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921, pp. 10-13, 16-18.

## Appendix 1

### The Tri-lingual Version

The *triple Clytemnestra* project involved the collaboration of three fundamentally distinct languages, nations and cultures (see above). The opening conceit of the performance was quite telling: it conjured up the image of a three-headed creature springing out of the earth like a tree whose roots ran deep inside, struggling however to break free from the soil, in order to gain some sense of independence. The coveted ideal of self-definition became a central motif in the production, with the alternation of the lyrical Greek, the sharpness of English and the mellifluous Turkish underlining each heroine's plea for a revised story to attach herself to.

To begin with, the text introduced the character of Clytemnestra as a young bride, an addition which brought in the freshness and possibilities, as well as the freedom and innocence of youth; all these aspects are usually denied to the generally grim, tragic portrayal of an unfortunate, adult murderess, which is the worldwide standard perception of Clytemnestra. In this version, the image of a young Clytemnestra in love with a young Agamemnon actually made her part of a shared history of ill-fated unions within the Greek mythical tradition. Clytemnestra's marriage ultimately proved just as doomed as her beloved daughter Iphigenia's frustrated union with Achilles. Quite expressly, in this version, Clytemnestra the bride mixes her lamentation with that of Clytemnestra the mother, together with that of Clytemnestra the reconciled aged Queen, and ultimately, at the very end of the play, the three sides of the character seem to find peace and shelter in a place of comfort and identity, physically coming together in one whole self.

The text is structured on three chronological levels, which trace the life of each of the title heroine's three 'aspect-characters': the young Clytemnestra, ethereal, desiring, hopeful, expectant; the adult fighter, traumatised, betrayed and raging for revenge; and the post-murder disillusioned woman, bitter, resigned, weary in her self-torment and her old grief, pleading for her own murderer to come to her final salvation. The temporal – as well as psychological – triptych, sustained on stage by the three actresses, roughly corresponds to three distinct moments that seal Clytemnestra's life: the sacrifice of the daughter Iphigenia by the father Agamemnon, the latter's murder by his wife Clytemnestra and her own subsequent murder by Orestes, her son.

Equally floating is rendered Clytemnestra's image as it moves across the temporal axis through the roles of lover, wife and mother and the corresponding emotions of desire, pain and guilt. The monologue moves back and forth in time and as the fluctuating temporality is given—in its stage realisation—through the movement and voice of three different female figures of diverse age and cultural identity, Clytemnestra's experiences are represented alternatively as expectancy, presence and memory, thus creating multiple possibilities for self-expressivity.<sup>3</sup>

While the three actresses fight for a piece of Clytemnestra's presence, the tension generated through the rubbing together of such disparate cultures as are the Greek, Turkish and Anglosaxon ones provides a fascinating backdrop to the unfolding of a character steeped in contradictions. Ironically, it is the musical cadence of the different languages co-existing on stage and making actors and spectators alike – concisely in their words –

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<sup>3</sup> Sakellaridou, E. *Clytemnestra Plus: 'Trasnationalizing' Woman's ST/AGE?* IFTR Conference. Helsinki, 2006 p. 3.

bear witness to an ‘overwhelming feeling of belonging’, which appears to give Clytemnestra her desired wholeness, and the production its uniqueness:

### **CLYTEMNESTRA 3**

Perhaps, we’re all just doomed to well-trimmed ennui, disguised within the barracks of decency. Acı içinde.

### **CLYTEMNESTRA 1**

Sonuçta, belki de hepimiz, edepliliğin sığınağında gizlenen bu düzgün biçilmiş iç sıkıntısına mahkumuz. Υποφέροντας.

### **CLYTEMNESTRA 2**

Ίσως, τελικά ίσως, όλοι, καλοραμμένες φοράμε ματαιότητες.  
Προστασία ψάχνουμε στα πλουμιστά οχυρά τους. Suffering.

## **Casts of *Clytemnestra’s Tears* (written and directed by Avra Sidiropoulou)**

### **SOLO VERSION**

Performed by Themis Bazaka (solo version)  
Set by Eva Manidaki  
Costumes by Ioanna Tsami  
Music by Vantias Apergis  
Lighting design by Melina Mascha  
Movement by: Margarita Mandaka

Performed at the Dipylon Theatre, Athens (2004)  
La MaMa ETC, New York City (2007)  
Staged Reading: New York Public Library, New York City (2001)

### **TRILINGUAL VERSION**

Performed by Themis Bazaka, Kristin Linklater and Derya Durmaz  
Set by Claude Leon  
Costumes by Ioanna Tsami  
Music by Vantias Apergis  
Lighting design by Melina Mascha  
Movement by Alikı Kontziou-Goussa

Performed at Tiyatro Oyunevi, İSM 2. Kat, Istanbul (2004)  
Theatro Aneton, Thessaloniki (Dimitria Festival, 2005)