

The Oresteia as a subject for an opera - The construction of a 'memory theatre'

The form of The Oresteia project has altered significantly from its first conception in December 1990 as a 3-hour opera utilizing Aeschylus' trilogy to a greatly compacted (75 minutes in duration) vision of particular themes, myths and characters that are found in Aeschylus' drama.

The work takes as its conceptual keynote different notions of 'memory'. These range from, for example, the functions and behaviour of memory in different psychological states or in brain disfunction (dreams, insanity, schizophrenia, hysteria, amnesia) to the idea of rituals as constructions of the collective memory of a society, to Renaissance Hermetic traditions of 'mnemonics' (The Arts of Memory) and its application in contemporary architectural and art theory. These ideas form a labyrinthine structure through which Aeschylus' characters undergo transformation.

The use of the term 'memory theatre' is a recognition that the themes of an ancient Greek drama - Aeschylus' Oresteia - still resonate as strongly as ever in the present. Its myths find many parallels with our contemporary culture - the questions surrounding the relationships between men and women, the rituals attending the cycle of birth, life and death, the destruction wrought by war, the roles of justice enacted on many levels and the individual strivings towards insight and fulfilment continue to be of the utmost importance to us.

Our 'memory theatre' is also a realization that the ghosts peopling Aeschylus' drama are not yet at rest - unappeased, their energy unexpended, they call out to us to have a hearing in new contexts. They take part in Aeschylus' 5th century B.C. drama but also have prior 'histories' (Homer, Mycaenaen myth, even earlier matriarchal religious cults) - one function of our theatre is to strip back Aeschylus' work to reveal something of their earlier existences. In the other direction, our theatre provides a space for them to tell their stories in our presence.

Their stories are not easy ones to tell - they are complex, disturbing, even traumatic. Hence, the sounds and techniques by which these stories are given voice are of an equally disturbing nature. A visceral and body-based notion of vocal production, an anatomy of the voice - breathing, sobbing, laughing, whistling in unearthly clamourings and ululations - play an equal part to 'singing' in the work's excavation of the boundaries of articulacy and inarticulacy.

Drawing upon Aeschylus' Greek text, the elegaic poetry of Sappho and the hypnotic and rhythmic lines of Tony Harrison's English translation of Agamemnon, the presences of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Cassandra, Orestes, Electra, a herald, the Furies, Apollo and Athena engage in a complex and multi-faceted reading of their parts in The Oresteia.

Remembering and forgetting, dreaming and prophesying, they might also challenge us to reflect on our own journeyings through the interior and exterior landscapes of human existence

Facets of the keynote - memory

1. Ritual as collective memory - Wedding
Funeral
Sacrifice

These three rituals celebrated in the forms of the Procession and the Banquet (Eating, Digesting, Excreting).

2. Memory Theatre (an architecture of memory locations)

7 archetypal figures - Prophet, Mother, Father, Male-Female duality, Wanderer, the Furies, the Divine.

6 objects of transformation - net, beacon, lion, eagle (vulture), hatchet, bed-bath-coffin.

3. Remembrance - Forgetfulness
4. Amnesia - Brain disfunction
5. Dreams and insanity
6. Clairvoyance (projected memory) - Prophetess Cassandra