A NEW VIEW OF ELEKTRA

It has been said that forgetting is important to mental well-being. Without the ability to let go of past experiences, moving forward would be difficult. But Elektra is a play about willful memory and the damage that happens to those who refuse to forget.

To keep the possibility of revenge alive, Elektra forces herself perpetually to relive and reiterate the gross injustice of her father’s murder at the hands of her mother and her mother’s lover, Aegisthus. Lamentation is the food she feeds on, and it is important to remember that the act of lamentation in ancient Greek culture was a form of political provocation, not an occasion for passive weeping. Women were responsible for mourning the dead, and indeed female outcries on behalf of their fallen kin were often so incendiary that laws had to be passed in Solon’s time to limit the number of days of public mourning.

I first directed Sophocles’ Elektra over twenty years ago at the Classic Stage Company in New York, with Pamela Reed (who tonight plays Clytemnestra) as Elektra, in the world premiere of a version by Ezra Pound. The poet translated the play while incarcerated after World War II, as a study in perceptions of sanity by a sardonic and hostile world.

In her masterful new translation, specially commissioned for this production, Timberlake Wertenbaker has focused instead on the deep emotional complexity of Sophocles’ characters. Because of her facility with ancient Greek, Wertenbaker has found a way to evoke the gorgeous formal structure of Sophocles’ language, while creating vivid characters that offer rich possibilities to contemporary actors. It was Wertenbaker who first pointed out how highly personal and particular the Chorus is in this Elektra: it is a Chorus intimately involved in the plight of the polluted city and in the agony of Elektra, longing to have the desecration purged so that order can be restored. We made the decision to embody this Chorus in the body of a single actress, Olympia Dukakis, in collaboration with a musical Chorus that provides a haunting sound world, created by composer/cellist Bonfire Madigan Shive. Thus the chorus is both personal and poetic, prosaic and heightened. Occasionally the chorus cries out in Greek,
as does Elektra, when no English word suffices. Always, the Chorus widens the lens of the play, asking us to consider the nature of justice and the difficulty of moral behavior.

It is a fascinating experience to perform this play against the backdrop of the Getty Villa, our stand-in for the ancient house of Agamemnon. In designing this production, we wrapped the Getty facade in security tape and chain-link fencing to evoke the protective barriers Clytemnestra herself might have erected to defend against acts of reprisal. We are, of course, sadly accustomed today to the sight of public buildings becoming bunkers against possible “terrorist” attacks, and we are certainly accustomed to repetitive cycles of violence. Perhaps this is the real fascination of revisiting Greek drama: it is an occasion to look at our own experience through the unblinking lens of great tragedy.

—Carey Perloff, Director