

Director's and Designer's Notes by Jane Montgomery

These are some thoughts about the process of preparing and directing *Trojan Women*. Written a year after the event, much of what follows is random - it's not been easy to put structure to random jottings in rehearsal notebooks, but I'm writing down these thoughts in case the conceptualisation and rehearsal process we went through can be of any use to other directors and performers of drama in the original Greek.

My starting point for *Trojan Women* was my curiosity about how this play was received when first performed in 415 BC. How did such an extraordinarily nihilistic examination of the sufferings of war go down with the Athenian audience, many of whom would have participated in the destruction of Melos only the year before? What does it mean to have a play so much about women's violation by men, written by a man, performed by men acting as women, watched by men who had recently committed similar acts and atrocities, set in a mythical framework of a war which, as we all know, is the fault of a woman? What are the boundaries of mimesis and mythos here and, given its historical and political context, just how subversive is this play? Most importantly for us, how could we re-evaluate and translate that level of subversion for a contemporary audience?

One of my major concerns was to avoid creating obvious parallels between the fall of Troy and any of the numerous contemporary instances of 'ethnic cleansing'. It strikes me as insulting and meretricious in the extreme to set the play 'in' the former Yugoslavia/a Nazi concentration camp/Rwanda/East Timor - a manipulative misappropriation of real suffering and a cheapening of a work of art that stands on its own two feet without needing recourse to easy sentimentality. So, in the early stages, it was crucial to find a designer who had the ability to look away from the obvious and deconstruct a play in highly theatrical terms. Happily, Michael Spencer was able to take the job. He and I had worked together several times before - he had designed many of the productions I had been in as an actor at Harrogate Theatre and I'd always enjoyed working with him, as I was impressed by his bravery and his very lateral theatrical imagination. Our working relationship was enjoyable and stimulating, involving very few pre-conceived ideas and a fair amount of random brain-storming.

Our first thoughts were about the contamination and dereliction of sacred places. We wanted some sort of structure that could convey the feeling of violation of space and sacred identity that is so strong in the play. Michael drew up several temple-based designs, but we found that although these conveyed sacredness and fate, they didn't suggest the personal suffering and violation of the characters. This is a story of private pain as well as rigid destiny and communal grief. We went back to the play and thought about the recurrent water imagery/ship imagery - possible implications of purity/cleansing and violation/rape. That led us on to the thought of a swimming pool - a place which a while ago was a space of safety, pleasure, health and purity. Corrupt that image, make the pleasure dome into a torture chamber-cum-abattoir, and you create an interesting subversion of expectations. The place of safety becomes a violated no-man's-land. Michael steered away from creating a veristic representation, and instead gave a only a nod to the swimming pool idea; keeping at the same time an indication of the temple proportions in the corridor at the back of the set - a transitional area for the threads of fate to pull each character inexorably to their destiny.

Costume

The depiction of the gods was the next stumbling block. We spent a long time trying to square various ideas - the gods as capitalists exploiting humanity (Thatcher and Reagan swigging brandy on a Chesterfield sofa in the midst of the human debris); the gods as symbols of media manipulation (Kate Adie plus video); etc. Of course these were all terrible ideas and we soon discarded them. The breakthrough came when we were sitting in Michael's garden one day and

saw his usually benign 3-year old tormenting the cat. That led us to children's amorality - the closest we could come to Homeric/Euripidean view of the gods, which in turn led us to look at all the characters in the play initially from a child's eye view. For instance, how would a child look at Andromache? What is the child's archetype for the perfect wife and mother: American 1950s, mom at home with Kelvinator 'fridge, starched apron and freshly baked apple-pie? Hence Andromache as Doris Day.

If you then apply the 'theatrical reality' of these characters' predicaments and suffering to the childish stereotype, we hopefully end up with an interesting subversion of the expected cultural norm. Had Doris Day been kept chained to a radiator in a caretaker's cupboard for several weeks, not seeing daylight, receiving little food or water, suffering physical and occasional sexual abuse, and fearing for her traumatised eight year old, she would not be looking like she'd just stepped off the set of Pillow Talk. That re-evaluation of stereotypes through the reality of characterisation was the basic principle for the dress, and to some extent behaviour, of all the characters - Cassandra, Helen, Hekabe and the chorus. Cassandra comes on stage 'celebrating' her 'marriage' to Agamemnon, so we dress her as a bride, but the fact that she has also been raped, and is repeatedly abused as a madwoman, makes a sick parody of her wedding - hence her wedding dress is bloodstained and the arms make it a straightjacket.

We all know that Helen was the most beautiful woman in the world, so how could she be dressed otherwise than as Miss World? - of course a decade or so of being vilified as a whore, and the booze, fags and drugs that she has taken to block out those insults, have by now taken their toll. The once stunning Miss Sparta now looks like a haggard cross between a bag lady and Ivana Trump. The costume is created from the imagined reality of the character's past, and the vulnerability of her present predicament (i.e. that she will only survive if she manages to seduce her husband again).

Directing: Language and Characterization

One of the major issues in directing the Greek Play is the language barrier. When I started on *Trojan Women*, my Greek was pretty rusty, and I was concerned that if I found the initial process intimidating as a Classicist, how much more so would it be for non-Greek speakers in the cast? Since I was, and remain, determined that the Greek Play should not exclude non-Classicists, I had to work out some specific directing strategies to cope with the language.

From a cast of 16, only six were Greek speakers. That limited the scope of early rehearsals, because clearly we could not start to look at the text until everyone was secure with the language. The non-Greek speakers had relatively relaxed language classes with me from March - June, in which I taught them the alphabet, meaning and general syntactical structure of their part. They then all received tapes and transliterations over the summer vacation so that they could feel confident with their pronunciation. Concurrent with these language rehearsals, I ran acting workshops, individually or in groups, to help the actors (some of whom had done little acting before starting rehearsals) to work on their characterisations.

As an actor, I have believed in the 'horses for courses' approach to characterisation - there's not much point applying Stanislavskian characterisation techniques to a Ben Elton farce. Save 'the system' for a play where subtext is everything. Theoretically it seemed improbable that a character-based technique would work with ancient Greek tragedy, but I was curious to see if such a rehearsal system could help the performers convey meaning, to each other and in performance, despite the language barrier. Working with a combination of Stanislavski's and Mike Leigh's rehearsal games, I asked the cast to create detailed histories for their characters and to analyse their motivations and objectives from moment to moment in each scene. Partly this was a ploy to develop the chorus, which, in directorial terms, had seemed the most interesting challenge. I was determined that this should be the *Trojan Women*, not just the tragedy of Hekabe, Cassandra etc., but that poses the problem: Who are these women? Not pleasantly spoken and well-educated young women from Cambridge, that's for sure. Each chorus member

would have to create a believable persona from within the communality of the chorus and fill their textual skeleton with credible subtextual flesh.

Characterisation workshops started off, again from the gods' perspective and their child's-eye view of a 'stereotyped' world. I asked the chorus to choose a simplified type of a woman - with the generalising simplicity that a child would employ. So we ended up with the mother figure, the young girl, the mistress, the young wife, the house wife, and a spinster tourist (highly unreconstructed, I know). Once we had the stereotypes, we started to work on the reality of what the people behind the stereotypes would be. With their biographies settled, we started to play rehearsal games to hone the reality of the character. A regular exercise was 100 questions: I would barrage the actors with questions like "If your character had a choice between Lurpak or Clover, which would they choose?", "What does your character think of Mother Theresa?", "Does your character listen to Radio 4 or Chiltern FM?" etc., while they privately wrote down their answers. I never knew the answers they wrote, and most of these questions were clearly nonsense (and obviously totally anachronistic) but they did help the actors develop an off-the-wall and totally lateral understanding of their characters.

In the initial stages of rehearsal, the actors' character development was quite a personal and private affair and probably totally perplexing for the cast early on - these are relatively scary exercises for a cast of non-professional actors (scary enough for professionals), and confusing when we had barely touched any Euripides at this point.

The cast was sent off during the summer vacation to familiarise themselves with the Greek. They returned at the beginning of September for four weeks of intensive rehearsals, run to Equity rules and expecting a professional standard of commitment. The first week was spent dissecting the script, so that everyone knew not just what they were saying, but also how people were responding to them. I also asked the chorus to start looking at their roles to decide which lines their character would be likely to say. That was an interesting process. Some lines all seven would decide to say; some, only two; one or two lines had no takers at all. As an exercise, it helped hone character delineation - one or two figures appeared strongly from the chosen lines; it also showed us where characterisations had not worked, or were too rigid.

The month of rehearsal was run very much as any professional rehearsal process. It was assumed that the language would by now pose no problems to any of the cast, and the only allowance made for the Greek was the occasional solo work on speeches, in which the actor would be made to repeat each sentence of each speech until it was clear that she or he could not only understand the syntactical structure of the line, but could also convey the colouration of language and rhythm.

I don't really believe in the concept of 'blocking' a play, so we worked on the understanding that if an actor knew their character, they would know what to do. This principle worked pretty well, by and large. Scenes with the children needed structure, and the complexity of the Cassandra scene also needed focus. But my job was simply to create a framework within which the actors could explore as they liked. For instance, although initially I had to position the chorus in their chained positions, the dynamics between them developed quite spontaneously and naturally. It was a joy for me to discover that by placing the 15-year old girl, who had been abused while witnessing the murders of her parents, next to the 30-something widow who had lost her children in a mortar attack three years into the war, a real relationship began to develop between them.

Interesting too that the dynamic on the other side of the chorus was so different- 4 very individual women, whose grief/anger/shock prevented them from interacting with each other very much at all. I liked that. It seemed important to show that just because these women were suffering victims, they could also be prey to normal emotions of dislike, jealousy and boredom.

The most vital addition to rehearsals was, of course, the music. Keith Clouston has given a very comprehensive run down of his approach in the composer's notes, so I won't go into the whys and wherefores of the score. But I will just say that the music created a remarkable mechanism

for releasing emotion from the cast. The strength and openness (vocal and emotional) that the chorus, and to some extent all the actors, discovered once they applied Albanian/Bulgarian drone techniques was a real revelation. We integrated music and characterisation rehearsals, so that Keith knew exactly the dynamic of the chorus, and had taken all ideas for their musical interaction from the actors themselves. It was actually very democratic. Most of Keith's rehearsal time was spent in research and simply listening to the chorus' process. Consequently, although the chorus only received all their music a few weeks before the show, they took to the style very naturally and quickly, I suppose owing to the extended period of improvisation before with Keith and myself, and time was not a problem. It was also a great help to have a talented and experienced student Musical Director who was able to drill them on the score while I rehearsed scenes with the other actors. We applied the, for want of a better word, 'organic' improvisational technique to the choreography and last scene. Nothing was done in these areas until a week before the production, when we felt ready to improvise within these scenes. The cast and chorus were exceptionally imaginative and courageous in their improvisations. They generated a substantial amount of material - Keith and I then structured the results of their improvisation. In performance, I should say I was very proud and touched by the level of commitment and performance the cast gave - more than I have experienced with several professional companies. It was an eye-opener to me to see how theatrical meaning transcends language, and a real pleasure to work with the company. The usual thing - the nastier the play is, the more fun you have in rehearsals. I am greatly, if somewhat apprehensively, looking forward to taking up the challenge again in the 2001 Greek Play, with the same professional team.