Theatre at UBC **Companion Guide to:**

The House of Atreus

adapted by John Lewin, from the* Oresteia *by Aeschylus

theatre at UBC

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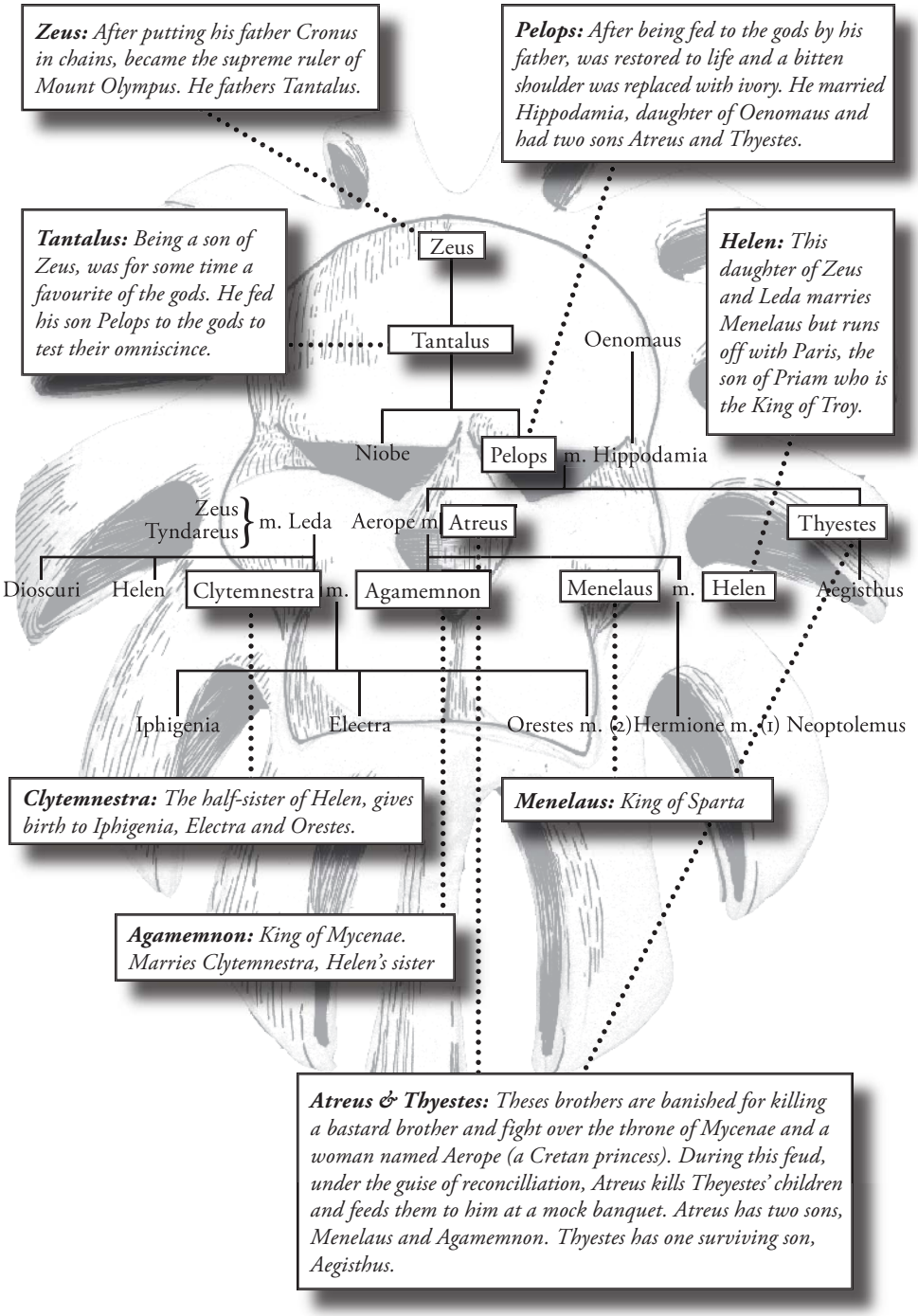

Crest of the House of Atreus, Concept Sketch by Mike Patton, 2005

The House of Atreus

adapted by John Lewin,
***from the* Oresteia**
by Aeschylus

Directed by KJ Sanchez

Set & Costume Design: Mike Patton
Lighting & Projection Design: Gillian Wolpert
Sound Design: Cast of House of Atreus & Jane Loong

September 28 to October 8, 2005
Frederic Wood Theatre

Theatre at UBC

In the interest of promoting our creative work and encouraging theatre studies in our community, Theatre at UBC proudly presents this Companion Guide to *The House of Atreus*.

Questions & Tensions from the Past & the Present

KJ Sanchez – Director

The council, led by Menelaus and Agamemnon have decided to go to war against Troy. The people are told that this is directly ordered by Zeus because Paris, who was graciously welcomed into Menelaus' home, has carried off his wife, Helen. A terrible ten-year war ensues, taking every able-bodied man away and leaving Argos with what can only be imagined to be limited resources. In Peter Meineck's translation of the *Oresteia*, the chorus tells us:

> Resentment, fueled by grief, spreads stealthily
> against the sons of Atreus, defenders of Justice.
> Around the walls of Troy young men,
> cut down in their prime,
> lie buried in the land
> they came to conquer
>
> "All for another man's wife!"
> Is whispered in secret

Troy is finally crushed by the "twin bronze fists", Agamemnon and Menelaus, and the victors return (those few that are still alive) with vast treasures and the spoils of war. The enslavement of Troy brings Agamemnon back riding "higher in fortune than any man ever rode". As one of the 48 percent of Americans who did not elect George W. Bush (and as an activist who did everything she could to keep him from getting elected—both times) I cannot help but see the parallels.

However, that is just the beginning of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. The themes explored throughout all three plays go far beyond a mere reflection of one place and time. What excites me most about the *Oresteia* is that it leaves me with more questions than answers, questions that are grappled with throughout the world: What is the relationship between old and young, women and men, mankind and the gods? How do we as a civilization make peace between the old ways and the new? Is there a way out of the perpetual cycle of retribution? Is there such a thing as true justice? And is justice, by its very nature, ever impartial? These are all questions that this remarkable trilogy lets you, the audience, decide for yourselves.

I have chosen John Lewin's adaptation (which the playwright makes very clear is an adaptation and not a faithful and reverent subordination to the original) because of its accessibility to the modern ear and dramatic potential for the modern stage. It also allowed us to perform all three plays in one evening. For those scholars in our audience, I beg your compassion and forgiveness for the liberties we have taken. As Lewin says in his introduction to this play, "I can only hope that this is not equitable with the insertion of a clock in the Venus de Milo's midsection".

And if it is like putting a clock in Venus' midsection, well…at least we'll know what time it is, right?

Enjoy.

The Politics of the Oresteia

***An excerpt from* Mirror of Princes: René Girard, Aristotle, and the Rebirth of Tragedy**

Christopher S. Morrissey – Department of Humanities, SFU

> *However much one may be envious of the life-style of the rich and famous, it is too removed from our everyday lives to be really irksome; in contrast, our neighbor's ostentatious good fortune really gets under the skin.*
>
> *But when we fantasize about the princess's glamorous existence, our neighbor's seems tawdry in comparison. If I am obliged to compare myself unfavorably with you, I will be unhappy. But rather than comparing myself with you, I can compare you with Princess Di as potential centers of my interest and desire, in which case you will clearly be found wanting.*
>
> *No doubt on the cultural scene it is you and I who occupy similar peripheral positions, whereas the princess is a representative of the center: we are watching her; she is not watching us.*
>
> — Eric Gans, "Famous for Being Famous,"
> *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* #321

The cult of celebrity has an anthropological function. Political leaders in the ancient world had an anthropological role similar to today's celebrity princesses. Their occupation of the center of attention, if successful, would have defused resentment between people on the periphery like you and me.

The human focus of attention on the glamorous one in the center is not simply morbid curiosity, like slowing down to view a traffic accident. Instead it is highly significant, if not the most significant of all our cultural activities. When we focus on the celebrated center, rather than on our rivals on the periphery, we participate in the most basic function of human culture. By it we defer violent conflict with our resented neighbor.

In this light, at the end of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, notice how Orestes departs from Athens at the founding of the Areopagus homicide court. This dramatic exit symbolically represents a great human evolutionary achievement. In my opinion, it commemorates the separation of office from person in political affairs. Orestes is a fugitive from the violent cycle of personal reprisal killings. He arrives as suppliant before the Areopagus to escape this. But the tie-breaking vote of Athena for his acquittal grants him official exoneration.

In other words, just as Athena rules as a goddess by occupying the sacred center of attention, so too does the *Oresteia* imply that Orestes' kingly office must be officially protected from the violence of the periphery's resentment against the center. This is why only the goddess Athena's vote can break the tie of human conflict and symmetrical resentment. As the celebrated central one, her judgment alone is the sacred seal on who can stand invulnerably in the center.

Clytaemestra's murderous claim on the centre was illegitimate because it was violence directed against a person and not against an office. The proof of this is her very succession in Agamemnon's place: if she had wanted to abolish the office, not the person, she would not have assumed his place in succession in that office. In fact, she killed the person to assume the office. Her grudge was with Agamemnon, obviously not with royal rule in general.

Therefore, when Athena deliberately founds the Areopagus, I suspect this symbolizes Aeschylus' approval of Ephialtes' reforms, but not of Pericles' attack on the Areopagus' executive power. Ephialtes' democratic reforms of the Areopagus were politically salutary to Aeschylus' mind, but total abolition of its executive power by Pericles, the abolition of its sacred center in Athenian political life, was not. On the one hand, as Ephialtes presumably intended, the tyranny of an undemocratic abuse of central executive power enslaving others is to be avoided. On the other hand, all executive power cannot be held by the democratic periphery, as Pericles presumably intended, for this would be a recipe for anarchy. Thus Aeschylus has the Furies warn,

> Anarch and slave
> Are both god-hated;
> Safest of all
> Is the middle way.

Like the princess at the center of attention, the secret of the Areopagus is not that it is watching us, adjudicating the resentments of our peripheral lives. Rather, thanks to artists like Aeschylus, we are watching it. As in all human culture, what occupies our central focus is alone what can possibly keep the peace.

Designing Collectively

Mike Patton — Set and Costume Designer

Designing collectively is an entirely new way of designing for me, where the ideas come out of rehearsing and discussion with the cast and director. In the past I have designed sets and costumes where the design concepts are more or less agreed on before rehearsals even start. This new method allows for some preconceived ideas to exist before rehearsals start, however the creative juices really start flowing during the rehearsals. In rehearsals, I as a designer of the set and costumes, get to take part. I make suggestions on how actors may interact with set pieces while the actors give me input into their characters and how they see those characters portrayed on stage.

The method I've used for this production is to attend as many rehearsals as possible and sketch costumes and set renderings as the rehearsals unfold. Then through discussion, I weed out the undesirables and build on to the design.

So many minds offering information can be a blessing and a challenge. It is my job to take all these ideas and make a cohesive mix that is both aesthetically pleasing to the eye as well as challenging me in the process—which I am very happy to say it has.

I write this as I am in the thick of that process. Renderings in all forms of completion litter my mind and my workspace. I have met some wonderful people and shared ideas with them. They in turn have offered ideas that I am happy to incorporate into this design. I hope you enjoy the culmination of all these ideas in this production.

Designers for Theatre at UBCs 2005 Production of *The House of Atreus*:
Mike Patton, Set & Costume Design
Gillian Wolpert, Lighting & Projection Design
Jane Loong, Sound Design

Clytemnestra, Preliminary Costume Rendering
by Mike Patton, 2005

Translating the Oresteia *into* The House of Atreus

Hallie Rebecca Marshall — Programme in Comparative Literatrure

Few who come to see this production will have any familiarity with Ancient Greek and thus will rely on translators for access to the works of authors such as Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Indeed, as the North American population becomes evermore unilingual its access to world literature becomes increasingly dependant on translations. In light of this, and the production that you are about to watch this evening, it is worth considering what translations can and cannot do.

A translation cannot ever fully represent the original. The act of translation involves the systematic dismantling of the original, phrase by phrase and word by word, and then its subsequent reconstruction as the translator seeks to rebuild it from the ground up replacing the original with building blocks pulled from his own language and vocabulary. Every translation will bear the marks of its translator and the time that it is a product of. For example the language of Robert Browning's nineteenth-century translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (the first play in *The Oresteia* trilogy) is very much a product of its author and era:

> Well, may it hap that, as he comes, the loved hand
> O' the household's lord I may sustain with this hand!
> As for the rest, I'm mute: on tongue a big ox
> Has trodden. Yet this House, if voice it take should,
> Most plain would speak. So, willing I myself speak
> To those who know: to who know not – I'm blankness.
>
> (Robert Browning, *Agamemnon*, 1877)

A modern audience would almost certainly find such language archaic and alienating, and an impediment to understanding the story. One of the central functions of translation is to make works accessible. As language and culture change over time old translations become dated and new translations are produced—such change is inevitable.

The translation produced for the most important twentieth-century production of *The Oresteia*, at the Royal National Theatre in London in 1981, is also markedly a product of its translator and his times. Tony Harrison is Britain's leading public poet, writing for theatre, film, television, and occasionally as a war correspondent for *The Guardian*. Poetry is all that Harrison writes, and it is always written in his north-of-England working class voice.

> Soon I'll be grasping his hand, Agamemnon's...
> Let him come home to us, whole and unharmed!
>
> As for the rest...I'm not saying. Better not said.
> Say that an ox ground my gob into silence.
>
> They'd tell such a story, these walls, if they could.
>
> Those who know what I know, know what I'm saying.
> Those who don't know, won't know. Not from me.
>
> (Tony Harrison, *The Oresteia*, 1981)

While Harrison's translation is marked by his technical skill as a poet and his northern voice, it is also, perhaps surprisingly, the English translation which comes closest to capturing a sense of Aeschylus' poetry in its alliteration, compound words, and theatrical sensibilities. Through Harrison's translation and the RNT's production thousands of people came to include *The Oresteia* as part of their cultural experience and background, narrowing slightly the cultural gap between 458 BC and the late-twentieth century.

Literature often functions to take its readers into worlds removed from our own by both time and place, while translations serve to transport the literature of other places and times into our own world. In fulfilling this function translations also permit works that would otherwise be relegated to a small readership to become an integral part of our shared literary and cultural background. The Irish poet and Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney uses part of line 36 of the Watchman's opening speech as an epigraph to his 1996 poem *Mycenae Lookout*. The poem, through the veil of *The Oresteia*, articulates Heaney's rage at all the senseless losses of war which had been experienced on both personal and national levels during the Irish 'Troubles'. The epigraph—The ox is on my tongue—however, notes the poet's own carefully guarded tongue during the troubled years. It is translation which makes the larger meaning of Heaney's poem accessible to a wide audience, as indeed it was translation which made *The Oresteia* accessible to Heaney himself, as he does not read ancient Greek.

Robert Frost complained that "poetry is what is lost in translation", yet Browning, Harrison, and Heaney all provide evidence to the contrary. What is equally important, however, is that in the poetry of each author something of Aeschylus' dramatic verse is given new life and finds new audiences. Most of you will leave here tonight uncertain how much of what you have seen is the work of Aeschylus, the translator, or the director. Nevertheless the fact that you can leave the theatre feeling that you have experienced anything of a play first performed in a foreign city, in a now dead language, 2500 years ago, is a remarkable testament to the power and function of theatrical translation.

Aeschylean Justice

C.W. Marshall — Department of Classical, Near Eastern, and Religious Studies, UBC

The doer suffers. By suffering, we learn. These truths lie at the heart of *The House of Atreus*, and offer a perspective on the relentless cycle of violence that human society creates in the name of Justice. When Aeschylus presented his 'Orestes-story'—the *Oresteia*—in 458 BC, he changed forever the way the Greeks would think about these concepts so central to our society.

The three tragedies that comprise the *Oresteia* were originally presented on the same day in Athens at a festival for Dionysus. An intergenerational story of domestic abuse and family violence, these plays constitute a profound investigation into the nature of Justice. *Agamemnon* concerns the return of the king after the Trojan War. It is not a glorious, welcome return of the homecoming hero, however: Agamemnon is lured into a web that leads to his murder. Aeschylus is careful not to judge his characters: each has many, conflicting motivations, and the 'obvious' reason for his death (revenge for the killing of his daughter Iphigeneia years before) is minimized through the use of the goddess Artemis, who demands Iphigeneia's sacrifice. *Libation Bearers* revisits the family years later, when Agamemon's son, Orestes, has just come of age. Orestes is preparing to avenge his father, though this too has unspeakable consequences. The doer suffers.

Over the course of these plays, a whole cosmology is revealed. The new, young, Olympian gods (including Zeus, Athena, and Apollo) have replaced the older earth gods, including the Furies—spirits of revenge and family bloodshed. So terrible is their power that they are described euphemistically as Eumenides, 'the Kindly Ones'. This new Olympian order enforces its will aggressively, and what it does, by definition, must be 'just'. Human beings must follow the directives of the gods even when it means, as it does for Orestes, unspeakable crimes. But can matricide ever be considered a just act? One would surely have thought not. Yet as Orestes faces this dilemma, his choice unleashes the Furies that drive him mad and force him into exile.

All this is a set up for the conclusion, *Eumenides*, which dramatizes the first murder trial ever. The violence of human conflict is raised to a superhuman scale, as divine beings participate in Orestes' trial. Does one violent act inevitably result in another, or is it possible to break the cycle of blood-guilt? The trial purports to give an answer, but even here things are not straightforward. The proceedings are tainted as the Olympians conspire to absolve their human agent, Orestes, and the results are hardly satisfying. Again, Aeschylus' deceptively straightforward action is problematized by multiple conflicting motivations for all the major players.

Right action provides no easy answers. Human justice is predicated upon an imperfect understanding of inscrutable gods whose actions are arbitrary and frequently cruel. Often, when we claim to do right, we are at the same time fleeing from unpleasant alternatives that complicate our motivation. Aeschylus understood this, and ensures that we in the audience question society's decision to let judges and juries, no less fallible than any other human institution, decide what constitutes Justice.

As a philosophical puzzle, the web that Aeschylus weaves is intractable precisely because it presents such a simple answer: human action does not typically receive the 'escape clause' given to Orestes. But we are lured into the net because of the compelling characters. Clytemnestra is one of the most powerful female figures ever conceived for the stage. Her control over the House of Atreus is (virtually) absolute, and her strength continues to escalate over the course of the trilogy. The 'woman whose heart in its hope plans like a man' (*Ag.* 11) has usurped male authority, yet at the crucial moment claims to feel true maternal concern. Dare we believe her, or is this merely another of her schemes? As always, Aeschylus forces the audience to decide, as it reconciles the dense poetic imagery with the shocking events being depicted. Clytemnestra stands in contrast with the goddess Athena, who approves 'the masculine in everything...with all my heart' (*Eum.*737-38). Human and divine, these two share so much, yet exist on opposite sides of the conflict. Aeschylus likely reinforced their parallelism by having the roles played by the same actor (who, underneath the female masks, was male in the original production).

The *Oresteia* changed the way the Greeks thought about and articulated Justice, as it operates on the human level and the divine. Orestes could never again be used as a straightforward model of good action, as he had been for Homer. Aeschylus' plays were reperformed in Athens within a generation of the author's death, and they have had a continued life on the stage ever since. As each production brings its own concerns to the text, *The House of Atreus* continually forces us to wrestle with problems that lie at the foundation of western civilization.

The House of Atreus Resource Guide

Compiled by C.W. Marshall — Department of Classical, Near Eastern, and Religious Studies, UBC

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