

A truly Olympian success for Zoe Wanamaker

ZOE WANAMAKER makes a heartbreaking Electra. Looking crushed and sexless in a ragged, out-sized overcoat and a severe crop, she plays Sophocles' heroine as a woman consumed by emotion. Rage at the murder of her father Agamemnon by her mother Clytemnestra chokes her throat, and frustration at her brother Orestes' delay in exacting revenge turns her walk into a preoccupied shuffle.

Here, the caprices of the gods and the tangled motives of mortals are overshadowed by a portrait of one woman's personal grief. It's a hugely demanding role, which Wanamaker carries off with conviction. And a good thing, too, since David Leveaux's production is otherwise tediously old-fashioned.

That might seem an absurd thing to say about a play more than 2,000 years old, but Leveaux tries to make a case for Electra's modernity. In a programme note, he suggests her paralysing sorrow is analogous to that of bereaved Sarajevans. His production, which transfers to the Donmar in October, utilises a new translation by Frank McGuinness, and a set and costumes by Johan Engels which deliberately evoke images of refugees amid the fresh wreckage

Electra ★
Minerva Studio, Chichester

NICK CURTIS

of ancient monuments. But while the psychological heart of the play, the depiction of consuming sorrow, remains timeless, the rest of it looks decidedly antique.

Apart from the odd, discordant phrase like "bosom pals" or "go easy", McGuinness's translation sounds like it could have been written any time in the last century. And apart from Wanamaker, the actors fall back on a style of performance that might be described as Ancient Classics by Numbers.

This involves moving as little as possible, staring very hard at the person you are talking to, and intoning your lines as if reading them from cue-cards of engraved stone.

Andrew Howard's attenuated Orestes has got it particularly bad, as has Marjorie Yates's Clytemnestra. Rudolph Walker injects fire into his account of Orestes' supposed death — one of those interminable Greek lists of offstage events — but otherwise it is Wanamaker's show. Since this is, after all, primarily about Electra, Wanamaker makes it all worthwhile. Her



Alastair Muir

An electrifying Electra: Zoe Wanamaker at Chichester

voice rings with plangent grief, and when told of her brother's fake demise she seems to shrink, collapsing inwardly. In one extraordinary moment, she rolls in the underfoot dirt, her imitation of Clytemnestra's dying scream evolving into a hysterical laugh and finally an exhausted sob. This would look stagy if

performed by a lesser actress. Zoe Wanamaker shoulders the psychological bulk of Leveaux's otherwise routine production, giving us an Electra both truly moving and truly complex.

● *At the Minerva until 27 September. Box office: 01243 781312. At the Donmar Warehouse from 23 October. Box office: 0171 369 1732.*

Electra Curtis Standard



Clipped By:

ianlharris

Sat, Nov 19, 2022