

The fears of a clown

Zoe Wanamaker is heartrending in the Chichester production of *Elektra*, writes Paul Taylor, but she lacks the intensity of the performance by Fiona Shaw

Professional grief-counsellors have had a crowded schedule just lately. Theirs might seem a very modern trade, but you can see it foreshadowed in the advice-dispensing Chorus of Greek tragedy. Sophocles' *Elektra* confronts grief-counselling with one of its all-time stiffest challenges. To have Hamlet on your books would, by comparison, be something of a picnic. In David Leveaux's new staging at Chichester, the leader of the three-strong female chorus at one point feels the need to park herself on a tombstone and light up a nerve-calming fag.

To play *Elektra*, an actress must be merciless with herself. She has to pull the audience right inside the pain of this woman who – little better than a slave in the palace of her murderous, remarried mother – has waited long years for the return from exile of her brother Orestes and for the moment when their slaughtered father can be avenged.

At the same time, a performance has to show how obsessive festering hatred can take avengers on a sickening lift-ride down to the unlovely level of their putative victims. When her mother defends the butchering of Agamemnon on the grounds that she was avenging his murder of another daughter, *Elektra* accuses her of having a bloody tit-for-tat mentality, quite deaf to the irony that this sums up her own position.

In Deborah Warner's landmark production of the late 1980s, a fixating and fixated Fiona Shaw played the heroine as an anorexic, self-mutilating neurotic, eaten up by grief and hate. Clawing the walls, she stalked round the precincts of a palace that could have doubled as an abattoir. The role is here taken by Zoë Wanamaker, who gives *Elektra* the countenance of a desolate clown and the stubborn, steely yet somehow vulnerable air of a woman trapped by fate in an eternal, bolsy and dreadfully isolated adolescence. Enveloped in a ragged, dwarfing trenchcoat that must have belonged to her beloved father, she patrols a set that resembles a morbid perversion of a children's sandpit, with its slide-

like makeshift ramp of a marble tomb.

An *Elektra* who spits straight into the pretty face of her cautious collaborationist sister (Orla Charlton) and who can't emit the word "mother" except as a retching croak, is not to be accused of sentimentalising the role. Yet Wanamaker is, on balance, more heart-rending than horrifying. What hits you is the love-starved loneliness of this "barren spinster". She cradles the urn which she thinks contains her brother's ashes as tenderly as if it were her dead baby. Confronted with the living man, Shaw's *Elektra* succumbed to a gibbering hysteria that nearly gave the plot away to the palace. With Wanamaker, it's the passionate possessiveness of the full-on kiss she gives mean-looking Andrew Howard as Orestes (right) that shocks. For the first time, she feels able to emerge from her father's coat which is now draped symbolically over the chair at the head of the table.

Elektra's enemies are dismissed with slangy contempt, in Frank McGuinness' lively translation, as "a waste of space". Johann Engels' design squanders spatial possibilities. There's a solid brick wall at the back: the side entrances and exits this entails deprives us of the chilling sense of victims walking into a trap which you get with those sliding aluminium doors in Warner's production. When Marjorie Yates' hard-edged Clytemnestra cries out in her death-terror here, it just sounds like an actress bawling

from the wings. Wanamaker shrieks, falls and rolls over with ghastly sobbing laughs in the earth. Lethal detachment eventually comes hard to this *Elektra*.

The horror of it was much more intense in the Warner production. Here, there's the strong suggestion that the longed-for murders fail to bring the heroine any deep psychological release. She's last seen laving her head under the water drip that has splattered on the tombstone throughout. She puts on a mask that weeps tears of blood. Where Sophocles' tragedy leaves the question of morality unnervingly open, Leveaux's production implies that mourning will continue to become this *Elektra*.

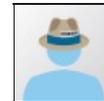
To Sat, Minerva Studio Theatre, Chichester, W Sussex (booking: 01243 781312), then 21 Oct-6 Dec, Donmar Warehouse, Earlham St, London WC2 (booking: 0171-369 1732)

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Sat, Nov 19, 2022