

Age of Rage review — a gruelling but rewarding night of Greek tragedy ***

It is, by design, much too much. The ever-busy Belgian director Ivo van Hove is here with his Internationaal Theater Amsterdam company to do for six Greek tragedies by Euripides and one by Aeschylus what he did here to exciting effect with Shakespeare's Roman tragedies and history plays (*Kings of War*).

Not secure in your myths? Hang on to your hard hat – or insert the ear plugs you can get free on entry – as a death metal trio announces a world of pain, revenge and hopeless bloodshed. King Agamemnon prepares to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia and names and locations get flung into the Dutch dialogue (translated in English surtitles). The effect is overcramped; *Horrible Ancient Histories*, but with zero humour. The evening should be even longer than nearly four hours or should have fewer stories smooshed together.

There is little preamble before we are flung, fast, into a lot of fear, a lot of rage. The acting is tremendous, not least from Chris Nietvelt as an understandably aghast Clytemnestra; Hans Kesting as a downbeat, hoodie-wearing Agamemnon; and Ilke Paddenburg as their girlish daughter Iphigenia about to discover Daddy's bright idea to sacrifice her to the gods. However, van Hove and his co-adaptor, Koen Tachelet, have piled on the agonies. The more the actors shout, the less I feel. Deliberate? Maybe. Deadening? Definitely.

And as this variety pack of tragedies travels from Greece to Troy and back, from Iphigenia in Aulis, to *Trojan Women*, to *Hecuba*, to *Agamemnon*, the smell of incense fills the room, blood capsules burst and bodies get hoist to the ceiling. There are staging flourishes that might dazzle in another context — gore, slow motion, graphics on a giant LED screen, artfully strange choreography of the Greek chorus by Wim Vandekeybus as percussionists play from cages on each side of the stage. Yet they threaten to feel like parodies of themselves.

A tragic waste of time, then? Confusingly, but thankfully, no. Van Hove shows the younger generation continuing the cycle of violence as they avenge the sins of their parents in *Elektra* and *Orestes*. This last hour is played in a different register: subdued, with shafts of sunlight on a set, by Jan Versweyveld, by now covered in earth. The production is given air, intimacy. The writing suddenly has space to work its strange, austere magic. First half: action. Second half: consequences. It registers. It is slower, quieter, altogether more resonant. Van Hove has a plan for how to make these ancient stories of the awfulness of violence and revenge tell. Patience is required, no question, but it's a plan that finally brings rich rewards.

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