

Age of Rage: this timeless, blood-and-thunder tragedy is a marvel to watch ****

Ivo van Hove's latest, at the Barbican, is a mash-up of plays written by Euripides and Aeschylus – and it works a treat



Esteemed Belgian director Ivo van Hove's Internationaal Theater Amsterdam has once again teamed up with the Barbican for *Age of Rage*, a mash-up of tragedies written by ancient-Greek dramatists Euripides and Aeschylus – *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *The Trojan Women*, *Hecuba*, *Agamemnon*, *Electra* and *Orestes*.

Listing van Hove's source material plays like that initially makes the show sound like an unwieldy endeavour. In execution, however, Van Hove skilfully distills this study of murderous crimes and bloodier retributions that eventually annihilate the Atreus dynasty into a clear-eyed and engrossing epic-theatre trawl through the hexed cycle of violence passed down from generation to generation.

In the process, *Age of Rage* is also a powerful examination of the deep-seated human desire to right a wrong and how vindictiveness, motivated by rage, disempowerment and radicalisation, is a constant of societal mores. Sometimes, Van Hove indicates, a revenger is purpose incarnate, their lethal intentions framed as state-sanctioned justice – such as the Greek massacre of Troy or the Russian invasion of Ukraine – rather than revenge and that the distinction between the two is not always clear.

The play begins with the acrid smell of burning flesh and art-rockers BL!NDMAN's score of snarling death-metal guitars and pounding kettle drums on Jan Versweyveld's minimalist set, which resembles a trussed stage at a music festival. A Greek chorus of dancers, who are at other times ritualistically celebratory or rabidly infernal, simulate warring sides in Wim Vandekeybus's strikingly uncomplicated choreography.

A scuffle breaks out between brothers Atreus and Thyestes, showing that volatile emotions are never far from the surface if men feel slighted. Then, under pretence of reconciliation, Atreus serves Thyestes his

own children as the main course at dinner. That staple of revenge tragedy – making an enemy eat a loved one – ensures that *Age of Rage* also operates as a snapshot of the history of drama, this recurring motif of which can be traced in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, the TV series *Game of Thrones* and the Peter Greenaway film *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*.



Thyestes casts a curse on Atreus and his descendants. Then we are at the port of Aulis where Agamemnon, son of Atreus and brother of King Menelaus, is in charge of the Greek army readying to set sail for Troy. He's been ordered by Menelaus to retrieve Helen, who has eloped with Trojan prince Paris, and restore Greek honour. The ships can't sail because there's no wind, a punishment by the goddess Artemis who requires the sacrifice of Agamemnon's oldest daughter Iphigenia to be mollified. His choice is stark: family or patriotism? His decision triggers a cycle of vengeance among his kin.

All throughout the play, Helen's name is cursed, which is symptomatic of how women, like Iphigenia's mother Clytemnestra and Hecuba, former queen of Troy, are betrayed, humiliated, the human sacrifice required by gods and more ferocious than men in exacting revenge. It's all played out against the backdrop of a screen on which are projected synopses, genealogies, blinding white light, flames and blood – so much blood, in artfully clarified images and gestures that bolster the direct speech and make this play such a marvel to watch.

One smallish gripe: the Dutch-to-English surtitles placed up in the rafters was not ideal, but the action was so absorbing that I hardly noticed the 3 hours 45 minutes of running time.

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