

Age of Rage, Barbican London ★ ★ ★ ★



Internationaal Theater Amsterdam's 'Age of Rage' (Photo: Jan Versweyveld)

Intense barely begins to describe this: a wild, relentless onslaught of noise and spectacle that sends us hurtling through the agony, fury and atrocity of six Greek tragedies by Euripides and Aeschylus.

Directed by Ivo van Hove for Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, and performed, over nearly four hours, in Dutch with English subtitles, it is demanding, yet gripping: a sensory overload that serves up the meat of the plays with raw, bloody immediacy, relentlessly hammering home their recurring cycles of violence and vengeance.

Designed by Jan Versweyveld, van Hove's ferocious production – following his classical epics Roman Tragedies and the Shakespearean Kings of War – has the balls-to-the-wall, dionysiac energy of a main stage festival gig. Just occasionally, it's so grandiose it teeters on the brink of absurdity, like a bombastic hard-rock Eurovision entry.

But it's a pure adrenaline shot of exhilarating, elemental drama.

There's a whiff of burnt flesh and smoke in the air before the action is even under way on a stage decked out in steel scaffold.

Captioned synopses and video of animated family trees invaluabley guide us through each branch of the tormented House of Atreus, whose fortunes we follow down the generations. That barbecue smell recalls the unthinkable act that kick-started the horror: Atreus spiting his brother, Thyestes, by dismembering and cooking his children and tricking him into eating them.

As Thyestes' curse on Atreus and his descendants plays out across the Trojan War and beyond, there are sheets of real flame, filmic images of missiles and nuclear bombings, barrages of strobing light, and scenes of rending grief, terrible rage, killings, mutilation and torture.

Death metal music, performed live by Belgian group, BL!NDMAN, is so loud it rattles your ribcage, while knives are sharpened on a spark-spitting flint wheel and dancers, choreographed by Wim Vandekeybus, move in angular processions like figures on an antique urn, twist into anguished contortions, or crawl and snarl like vicious dogs.

The brisk textual adaptation by Koen Tachelet and van Hove, and the storytelling, amid the nerve-shredding hysteria, are lucid: it's an especially effective touch that all the slaughtered children – notably, Iphigenia and Polyxena, young women sacrificed to the gods – are poignantly played by Ilke Paddenburg, the innocent collateral damage of their parents' feuds.

Hans Kesting's treacherous, manipulative Agamemnon, Chris Nietvelt as his agonised queen Clytemnestra and Maria Kraakman as trauma-crazed clairvoyant Cassandra are indelibly memorable; so, too, are Héléne Devos and Minne Koole as Elektra and Orestes, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra's exiled, humiliated daughter and son, whose murderous plotting has a particularly desperate, hopeless futility.

There's a potent pertinence to everything from geopolitics to terrorism, sectarian vendettas and gang crime. And it is an astonishing experience: shattering.

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