

Caroline Bird: This isn't the first time I've approached a Greek tragedy – I've written a version of the *Trojan Women* that was set in a mother and baby unit of a prison; I've just finished writing a version of *Alcestis* which is based around the cult of celebrity deaths, and how they have very lucrative tours as holograms after their deaths; and now this one. The first thing that I do is try to have a very personal response to it, and reignite the dilemma in my chest as if it's currently happening. Even though obviously I know [the story has] been told before and I didn't come up with it, I can't feel like that when I'm writing it otherwise I can't have anything to say. I have to try and convince myself, at least for the period of time that I'm writing it, that these are my characters, and this is my story, and it's never been told before. The way that I do that is to go through the translation and write notes in the margin, but not academic, or even clever notes. I write Jeremy Kyle-type responses, like 'oh my god! What the- I can't believe she just said that!' Or I underline stuff, 'that's clearly not true, I don't believe this' – I write all these little things as if it was currently happening and I was responding to it. I need to try and get myself worked up about it, and I need to get very subjective. If I was trying to create a character that pleased and did justice to all of the different interpretations of the character – that's not a character. That's an exercise, and it would be impossible and it wouldn't work. So I have to find a way of giving it a heart transplant – it can still have the same body, but I've put my heart in it.

The task for this one was slightly different in the way that it was zooming in on mainly what I thought about Agamemnon and his experience. Agamemnon has sent a letter, and his own words are now out there, and they are bringing Clytemnestra and Iphigenia to him – his words, doing that. Around him are ten thousand breathing soldiers that you can hear offstage – my play's actually not called *Agamemnon*, it's called *The Restless Troops*, but they had to change it for the programming so it made everything clear. They're surrounded by all of these breathing soldiers who are there precisely because of Agamemnon's words – he's a political figure, very much into propaganda as poetry, poetry as propaganda – he's gone round on this big campaign, going round villages and giving them amazing talks where he says things like, 'the ashes of the fallen soldiers will fertilise the hyacinth'. He's got all these soldiers – men and women – really hyped up and totally ready to die. In fact, they're basically already dead, because they've already decided that they're going to sacrifice themselves. They're all around sleeping, and there's no wind, and it's really hot, and everyone's going crazy. Agamemnon is such a dominant man, and he's never had to deal with feeling weak or in a crisis, and therefore he has no resources to deal with the feeling that's happening to him in that moment. When my play starts, he's really drunk, and it's the middle of the night, and he's ranting to himself, and he's realised that the letter has got to be changed – he's got to try and send out new words. And then the process of the play is a strange thing, because he's already sealed his own fate with his own words. I have a messenger who is a female soldier, who basically is the voice of the ten thousand restless troops, and most of the time she just quotes him back to himself – 'did you mean it when you told us that extracting a soldier from his duty was like extracting plasma from his blood?' Menelaus is the sociopath brother who's very into his hygiene and washing his hands all the time, but a total rapist, and he also quotes Agamemnon back to himself most of the time, and says things like 'well we're not going to obey you, we're going to obey the

real you, we're going to obey who Agamemnon was yesterday.' They spend most of the play just telling him what he's already said, so you get this effect of Agamemnon being in an echo chamber of himself, surrounded by loads of breathing versions of himself that he has created. Eventually at the end the messenger puts her knife to his throat, and has this speech where she basically says, 'with your words, you have ignited this war inside us, and you cannot extinguish it now – your daughter has to die because of the war that you've started inside us with your words.'

In the play, Agamemnon and Menelaus both have an amazing ability to believe whatever self they currently inhabit. When Menelaus is accused of cheating, which he definitely has done on numerous occasions, when he says 'I was fucking faithful', he really means it in that moment. When Agamemnon says 'I am a good man in a dreadful situation', he really means that. So much of it is about them trying to renegotiate the events and themselves in order to be good men in whatever situation, despite the fact that Agamemnon smashed a baby's head on a rock, but then managed to, amazingly, remythologise himself into a good husband. The difference between the two men and Clytemnestra is that Clytemnestra has mythologised herself – I wanted, the first time she comes on, people to think, oh my god, this is a bit of an offensive stereotype – so she comes on, just babbling pleasantries and calling him Daddy Bear, and she's got this big dowry and she's saying 'oh, gold is so impersonal.' I wanted the audience to feel quite uncomfortable with my interpretation of Clytemnestra as this kind of footballer's wife. But when she comes back, she switches, and we realise that's not her at all, and actually what she's done is created this mythology of herself to deal with the fact that she has to sleep with her late husband's murderer every night, and that she has to cuddle her rapist – she has to create this energy of manic harmless ness that radiates from her at all times, in order to combat the war in the air, and the violence and the blood and the horror. That's the difference – the men don't realise they're mythologising themselves, but Clytemnestra knows who she really is underneath that and is able to switch.

A note on the style of it – it's written in very thick poetry, which is also quite humorous. The theme of poetry and the responsibility and the danger of poetry in war goes through [the play] as well, because poetry has [the effect of] wrapping around your heart and telling you something is true just because it's in pretty words, and it can be used for evil. I also like to put humour through things because it makes it much worse – you can make people lean in a bit, and then you can really punch them in the face.

Lulu Raczka: I thought I'd start by explaining the provocation I got from Chris Haydon, who commissioned [us] to write these plays. We sat down and he asked me to be part of the *Quartet*, and I assumed, because I was the youngest writer, that he would give me Iphigenia. But he gave me Clytemnestra, which I was annoyed about, and made it clear to him that I was unable to write a play from Clytemnestra's perspective, given that she is a woman who, throughout the process of this play, loses her daughter because her daughter is murdered by her husband, who is also, as Caroline pointed out, her rapist and former husband's murderer, and I was like 'I can't write that!' And Chris said, 'I don't care! You're going to do it, and I'm going to pay you to, so go off.' So I did, and I tried to use my position on the play as my jumping-in point.

I wanted to avoid having to write Clytemnestra altogether; she's not in my play, but it's very much a play about her. I created four different characters who are all focusing on her and talking about their relationships with her, with her being absent. The first character to be on

stage, and that I came up with, is a movie director – and I say movie because he very much directs movies and not films – and he’s working on a new adaptation of the Troy trilogy, and has decided to focus on Clytemnestra because of the recent feminist developments in Hollywood – Mad Max happened and now everyone in Hollywood has decided that they’re feminist. He’s writing it from Clytemnestra’s perspective to carry out a humanising process for her, but he’s very exploitative, and the way he talks about it is using these ideals for money, essentially. Then there’s a professor who’s talking about her relationship to the character, and how she sees Clytemnestra fitting into the canon, and how she sees Clytemnestra fitting in with the *Oresteia*, and seeing [*Iphigenia in Aulis*] in terms of the *Oresteia*. Then I wanted to separate the play into two different worlds: this is the world that the director referred to as the ‘present future’ world, because there’s also a ‘present past’ world, in which a maid in the palace of Clytemnestra, who witnesses her murder of Agamemnon later, and who sees her grief after Iphigenia’s death, comments on her relationship with the queen, and a soldier who witnesses the sacrifice of Iphigenia talks about his experiences.

You’ve got two very separate universes, one of which is hyper-aware of everything that’s happening – they’re very aware of every adaptation and different understanding and different interpretation of the play through history, and they want to talk about these characters from that point of extreme knowledge. Then you have two characters who are in the middle of everything that’s happening and have absolutely no idea what’s going on – there’s this soldier who knows he’s going to war but he has no idea what will happen, and a girl who’s in the middle of a war and just lives in Greece and has nothing. I wanted to have two very specific different jumping-off points for the play, to have the point of being extremely informed and extremely ill-informed, and how these work together and work against each other. They all speak in monologues, because in my work I’m really interested in liveness, and what it means when an actor or performer speaks to an audience directly, and that audience-performer relationship, so I hope my play was exploring that, at least in a small way. I think the play, as I was writing it, became an exploration of empathy, and how possible it is to actually feel what someone else is going through, which goes back to my initial refusal to write the play because I couldn’t experience Clytemnestra’s feelings. I think all of the characters in their own way believe that they can interpret the feelings of this woman, but actually have no experience of what she’s going through. That becomes a greater question about adaptation itself, and how we take characters and use them, and create different versions of people, and how all of these characters become our own subjective versions of them, but actually how there’s always this gap between us and them and what they’ve experienced. Can we ever really understand these Greek plays, and can we really understand what people were experiencing in these completely different universes to our own? That’s what I wanted to talk about.

EC: One of the things I found most fascinating in your play, Lulu, was your zeroing in on Clytemnestra at the moment when the sacrifice takes place, and the exploration of where she is and what she’s doing at that moment. When did you become fascinated with that moment? It’s not something I’ve seen explored in any other adaptation of this story.

LR: I’ve argued with the director of the play a lot about this, because she thought that [the death of Iphigenia] is seen, and that I was just being ridiculous. But when I read the play, there’s a moment where Iphigenia is led into the temple, and you see her being taken away, and then a man comes out of the temple and tells Clytemnestra that her daughter has been

swapped for a deer, and I just couldn't possibly imagine what a mother would do knowing that her daughter was being murdered at that moment – it just seemed so unbelievably horrifying. That was the moment that I wanted to focus on, just to give all the pieces that were so different some clarity, so they could all think about that one point.

GB: What particularly struck me about your play, and probably extends to the quartet as a whole, is that Clytemnestra is absent, and you're dancing around her. The quartet as a whole is dancing around Iphigenia. I don't think we really get to grips with Iphigenia, we see her in only one out of the four plays, and then she's very silent, and the most powerful moment is actually when she doesn't speak but she performs that really wild dance. Was that a decision that you all took, or a directive that was given to you – this absence at the heart of the quartet? Of Iphigenia, but also all the other issues of absence – absence of Clytemnestra, and even the Chorus, with nothing bringing the four members of the chorus together, apart from the four screens.

LR: Caroline, what did you think about Iphigenia? Did you want to include her?

CB: I was allowed four actors, and I could have had Iphigenia played by an actress doubling up, but I wanted to have the female messenger. So it was first of all out of necessity, but then that worked for me because it was all about that domestic gritty negotiation, with Agamemnon trying to create an interpretation of himself that made giving the order feel as moral as possible. I'd have needed an hour and a half to get Iphigenia in as well and give her the right amount of space. So, with the ingredients I was allowed, it didn't work to have Iphigenia in it. I know that Suhayla very deliberately wanted Iphigenia hardly to speak at all right until the end, because then by the time Iphigenia comes to say that she's going to sacrifice herself for Greece, you can see that one of the reasons for her doing that is that it gives her the chance to say something that no one expected her to say. I think Suhayla finds a brilliant way of [giving a feminist interpretation], because it's the one thing that Iphigenia is able to say that [her parents] haven't tried to feed into her brain. Her silence is quite loud, I think.

GB: This multi-vocal nature, and the absence in the heart of the quartet, point to the many voices that are creating this representation, which is so much what adaptation can be about – adaptation and translation. Are we any closer to identifying whether these are adaptations or translations, or whether they are original pieces of writing? And does it matter?

David Bullen: My impulse as a creative person would be to say it doesn't matter, because actually when you sit down to write an adaptation of these kinds of texts, you've got to put away the fact that there are hundreds of previous versions, and claim it as your own temporarily, because otherwise the creative process cannot necessarily happen in a way that makes something that's worth people going to watch. So in that sense how we define it may not necessarily be important. From an academic perspective, though, I think, actually, there are a lot of issues here to do with authenticity and how the classics are utilised and reworked, and the politics they can be made to do. In the same way that [Caroline] said that poetry can be put to terrible use, Greek tragedy can be put to terrible use. I think that the advantages of trying to identify those boundaries between translation, adaptation, appropriation, whatever terminology one uses, are that actually you can identify what's going on culturally and politically in that web of meanings.

EC: One of the things I wrote down during [Katja Krebs'] talk was, 'who do these terms serve?' Which is your point – these terms are very useful in academia, and Katja raised some points

about commissioning and funding structures, but often I don't think they're useful to the creative practitioners. My second reaction was to another point Katja raised – you said talking about whether they're one work or four separate works is another symposium. I struggled to classify the four in the same way, because I think Lulu's and Chris Thorpe's are completely new works, whereas Caroline's and Suhayla's are closer to the original – still new works, just a bit closer. We just have so few Greek tragedies that survive – out of Sophocles extant works, for example, we have between 5% and 7%. So there were likely many other *Iphigenias* that Euripides knew of, maybe saw, that we just can't be certain which elements in his plays are Euripidean innovations and which ones have been borrowed from other plays. So sometimes I think the discussion of the terminology is moot, because of the question of what's being adapted and who wrote the original works.

Katja Krebs: Kaite O'Reilly adapted the *Persians* not so long ago for a performance at a military training site in the Brecon Beacons – it's a mock German town that's used to train British troops in urban combat. It was absolutely fascinating. Kate O'Reilly was desperate to present her work as a translation, and present her process as a translation, and everything she said about it – she kept saying 'I don't have any access to the original text, but I've looked at 23 different translations from different periods' and she was at pains to present her work as being faithful, and it was all about that. So to some people it's really important as a process. Because I'm a historian, what I find really interesting is how it changes – why at this moment in time we mess it all up, because what's important to us is individual creativity. In the 18th or 19th century it was a very different kettle of fish. So to me, it's interesting what we do with it in terms of what that says about the cultural importance attached to these rewritings. It's of consequence to understanding our positioning vis-à-vis notions of authorship and originality and what importance we attach to it, and the idea of the romantic artist who does this on his or her own, which you didn't do – you worked in the context of the collaborative art of theatre, where you can't do anything on your own.