

**By Jove Theatre Company** are a London-based theatre collective making new work out of old stories for politically conscious audiences in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their latest project, **The Orestes Project**, is a collaboration with Professor Nancy Rabinowitz of Hamilton College, NY, and examines the story of Orestes through lenses of storytelling, queer identity, and cycles of trauma. This conversation with members of the company, held on Monday 21<sup>st</sup> October 2019, discusses the process of beginning the project, what adaptation means and how it can happen in practice, why the project is urgent for the company, and how being involved in classical reception can influence our understanding of ancient texts.

**Nancy Rabinowitz** is Professor of Comparative Literature at Hamilton College, New York, and a dramaturg on The Orestes Project. She teaches and publishes on Greek tragedy and modern literature, and is actively involved in various projects teaching and using Classics in prisons.

**Marcus Bell** is a dancer, choreographer, and member of By Jove. He has performed with Matthew Bourne's company New Adventures and trained with Ballet Boyz, and is currently studying for a PhD in receptions of the ancient chorus in modern dance at the University of Oxford.

**David Bullen** is a theatre practitioner, writer, and co-artistic director of By Jove. He holds a PhD on the reception history of Euripides' *Bacchae* from Royal Holloway, University of London, where he teaches in the Drama department.

**Christine Plastow** is a Lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University, and an associate director of By Jove. Her primary research interests are in Athenian forensic oratory.

**An illustrated version of this conversation is available on the *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* website:**

<http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2020/orestesproject>

### **Getting started with The Orestes Project**

**Q: How did you come to be involved in the project, and what were your contributions to the process?**

**Nancy Rabinowitz:** I was at a conference where I gave a talk about social justice and the Classics. It was a huge overview starting with 19<sup>th</sup> century queer readings of the Classics in a defensive way, to say that not only were they queer but that they presented a positive role model. Carpenter and Simons had used the Greeks that way, so I was marking that as a beginning of a gay-positive inquiry in Classics. The research that I was doing was for an article on the *Iphigenia in Tauris* for a book which has yet to come out, but I was interested in the long story of Orestes and Pylades. Marcus [Bell] came up to me after my talk and said it was great to hear my talk, and that he was empowered to come out to his family by reading the *Iliad* in high school. That stunned me, because I couldn't imagine anyone reading the

*Iliad* in [the US] and feeling empowered to come out. So we were chatting and at the time I was on sabbatical and was looking to expand what I had done on the Greeks, and I had a project called 'Orestes and Pylades Through the Ages'. I was imagining a research team looking at all the different periods, and at art history, because I knew I couldn't do it all, and I didn't know how much I could do. Marcus told me he was part of a theatre group, and that he thought they would be interested, and it was true, you were interested! That's the serendipity.

**Marcus Bell:** On a personal level, when I moved to the UK from the Middle East I was outed rather than coming out. In this context the *Iliad* became a way of talking openly about male-male desire in the classroom, which was something that I hadn't had access to before. In that sense, why I found Nancy's talk so powerful was that it was something I had found useful in my own experience, but also something that I wanted to investigate further through outreach and thinking about the way that these texts could be used. It wasn't necessarily like it was for John Addington Symonds, a revelatory moment of 'this is who I am, this is who I desire', as I was already figuring that bit out. But working up against the edges of the violent homophobic punishments and laws in place in the Middle East which I had internalised, talking about the *Iliad* in the classroom became a way of dealing with that and talking about the way that men may have desired each other, and that this was still meaningful today. I was also thinking about how movement contributed to my involvement in the project, as well as meeting with Nancy. My role was providing choreography. In addition to working with text, we've been working heavily with movement. I'm a dancer and a choreographer, as well as researching the ancient world. My input has mainly been to work with Susanna [Dye], the movement director, to think about themes that we might research with the body in this story. We thought about the Furies, repetition, remembering, and came up with exercises that deal with the tension that exists between bodies, as means of experiencing things between us. This is part of my interest in researching classical reception with and through the body.

**Christine Plastow:** My first introduction to the project was when Marcus and David brought it to the company. My usual role in the company is research, and this was a project where Nancy had already provided a strong research base for the project, so I reflected on where I would fit in with such a project in the beginning, which ended up breaking down into three roles. The first was to act as a gatherer of evidence, taking a lot of notes and photographs in the rehearsal room, using another part of my research skills in the sense of gathering evidence and documenting the process. I think this has been valuable as we've worked in small chunks rather than continuously, due to the nature of the funding structure and our other commitments. The second thing I was able to do, as an academic who has also been working with By Jove for a long time, was to provide bridging between the academic side of the project and the dramaturgical and artistic side, and help to bring out a dialogue between those elements. The third thing I've been doing is writing, which is very exciting for me, because it's the first time I've done any creative writing for By Jove. We had an early workshop where we were all asked to bring creative responses to the material Nancy had provided, and I chose to contribute text. Happily what I wrote was quite well received, and some of it ended up being integrated into the text we're working with at the moment, so for me that's been a really rewarding process – it's always rewarding for me to work with By Jove as a researcher,

but it's especially rewarding to feel like I'm contributing in a tangible way to the artistic process.

**David Bullen:** The way I came to be involved in the process mirrors what you all have already said in many ways. I heard about it from Marcus, and then entered into an ongoing conversation with Nancy via email that in some ways helped to flesh out some of the details of the project as we moved forward. That back and forth with Nancy was really engaging for me, both as an academic and as a theatre-maker, as we began thinking about what this project might be. I've been contributing in two modes. The first was an artistic director role, thinking about where this work fits for the company in terms of what we're making and doing, and how it might help us to develop our practice as well as continue to further our mission of engaging audiences with diverse politicised reimaginings of the Classics. The second was a writer and director – I contributed writing when we called for creative responses, but as we moved forward I was thinking with a director's hat on about how we might pull this diverse set of pieces together into a performance of some kind that was coherent – or anti-coherent, but as a strategy rather than a by-product! So I've approached the project in a way that draws on my experience as a gay man engaged with the Classics, but also as someone who's trying to see all the puzzle pieces as a whole.

### **The adaptation process**

**Q: What was your 'adaptation', or engagement in the adaptation process, and how did you go about it? What points and modes of storytelling did you choose to focus on?**

**NR:** When it came to the adaptation process, I kept doing research, but I never really did get into writing anything for the performance piece. I think that, for me, it was so exciting not to be doing research for publication, and it was very liberating. I've taught reception for many years – when I teach tragedy, I don't just teach the ancient plays – but I hadn't really tried my hand at it, and I still haven't. I did get up and take part in the workshops, so there's hope for me yet! I would say that my role as spectator was to see where this material went with other people's interests at the helm, and allowing myself not to care what people did with what I had been working on, which is very different from an editing process or other kind of academic collaboration. I did have anxieties about being a feminist working on these male heroes, and I was interested in the way in which the group, in the early stages, was producing much more material about Iphigenia. So it was interesting to me to see where other people would take the myth.

**MB:** At first, I was thinking about it quite literally, how we might adapt into theatrical modes, so I did some writing as well as the dance practice-as-research, and tried to take quite a direct approach to how you'd stage it. But that changed after the first workshop, doing more movement work, and thinking about who is in charge of telling the story. This shift meant investigating concepts of leading and following and exercises about repetition and remembering, how things get lost, change, and get ingrained in the story. We did an exercise where a person performed Orestes murdering Clytemnestra, and the next person came into

the room, watched them, and then did their own version of it by focusing on their patterns of breathing, and as we went on through each iteration things started to change and it became about the failure of memory, or the failure of passing memory onto someone else. That's really where my focus went to, and specifically to how the story might be useful for queer people today. I focused on how Orestes and Pylades could be transported to a contemporary setting, and wrote a scene about them meeting in an LGBTQ+ bar in London. But similarly to Nancy I was wondering about the limits of retelling their story today, what happens to the female voices in these narratives, and how their myth might fail our project of doing feminist and socialist work – are Orestes and Pylades useful figures for us? Is the model of their relationship, where they do murder Orestes' mother and engage in acts of violence, a useful one for thinking about queer relationships?

**CP:** In my research I don't necessarily work closely with mythology – I work with texts, but not the dramatic texts, and I tend to work with things from a social historical perspective, because I'm interested in people and the things people do, so that was the mindset that I was coming to this story with in the beginning. When I was thinking about writing creatively as something that I haven't done a lot of before but that I wanted to explore, I was thinking about how I could try to access something about the characters through my writing, try to get into some human experience, which led to an interest in the physical and the mental or psychological experiences of the characters. For me, in a heightened story like this, it can be difficult to understand the characters' motivations – they are so often driven by the narrative or by fate, so I wanted to find human motivations that would be more comprehensible to a modern audience. For me, that was to be done by engaging with ideas of emotion and sensory experience in particular, because those are things that motivate people and spur them to action, especially in a story with a lot of heightened trauma going on. I asked what it meant for a human being to live within these stories and these events. I'll talk briefly about one piece I wrote that encapsulates that approach. The piece was about Orestes being pursued by the Furies, particularly in the catatonic state that as a company we became quite obsessed with, and the idea of the Furies as a psychological rather than a physical presence. I was thinking about the sense of a nightmare and an oppressive feeling that can't be escaped, playing out in a way that is out of your control and has an internal logic that doesn't necessarily mesh with reality. I considered the sensory nature of what that experience might be – a sense of choking darkness, texture and smell that can give a feeling of the force of divine retribution – what that might feel like physically as a way of understanding the trauma that Orestes might experience going through that, and how the desperation to escape that feeling at any cost might drive a person forward.

**DB:** I came at this with a slightly different perspective, in the sense that By Jove's first two shows were adaptations of material in this cycle of stories, a project called *Electra-Orestes* in 2011 and *The Women Screaming Beyond* in 2012. I provided the text for those two pieces, adapting Sophocles' *Electra* and Aeschylus' *Eumenides* primarily, so in some ways I had worked through what Christine just talked about, and had purged my need to work out those sensory inroads from a writer's perspective. So this time I found myself thinking more and more about the bigger historical picture, which came out of discussion with Nancy, thinking

about how these stories and their variants might resonate across time with different peoples, and how we might be able to do more than just stage a story or stories, but their impact on people and their cultural and political meanings. From a director's perspective this meant thinking about how the various different constituent elements that we had generated – music, movement, and text being the core three, and latterly design and scenographic elements – could come together in a way that enabled us to go beyond the story, and not just regurgitate this material for its own sake but find ways to comment on it. There are a couple of areas I can flag up here. The first is the movement sequence that emerged between the statue of Artemis and Iphigenia, and this came out of us trying to think about what kinds of queerness are present in these stories, and how this story might resonate with contemporary queer lives in a way that goes beyond male-male desire. We were really drawn to Iphigenia as a character from the beginning, and in some ways her ghost is at the heart of the *Oresteia*, so that's not surprising. We staged this movement sequence imagining that the statue of Artemis that Iphigenia guards in Tauris comes to life, and that we can express something of what Iphigenia has been feeling over the period of time that she's been isolated in a distant land through her engagement with what we know logically to be an inanimate object but on stage can become a feeling body that can relate to Iphigenia in more sensual ways. Susanna [Dye] the movement director wanted to push that sensuality. That was one way we wanted to make this resonate beyond the most obvious same-sex desire scenario [between Orestes and Pylades] in these stories. The second piece is a piece of text generated by Marcus [Bell] that, for me, read very much like the first act of Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls*: in that text a number of women from different historical periods are having a dinner party together and talking about their different lives. Marcus wrote a version that was the various characters – Orestes, Pylades, Clytemnestra originally but later replaced by Iphigenia, and Electra – having a conversation about what they mean as queer figures in the world. I think that was a scene that, in the [research and development showing] we produced, ultimately drew quite a lot of differences of opinion from the audience. We didn't have much time to work on it, but that idea to do more than the story, to extend it and think about its place in history, has been my chief interest in the project and something that I hope we will continue exploring as the project develops.

### **Why this project?**

#### **Q: Why this? Why us? Why now?**

**NR:** I was very clear in that I was writing about the silencing of the same-sex desire – which David just called 'obvious' – and the literature that I was reading was so divided on the topic. Orestes and Pylades are included in the work on sex, even if just a nod, but in the myth work they aren't there. I really wanted to break that silence and use it in a gay-positive way. I think I'm always fighting with Halperin and the dominant received view that it's all about power and dominance, so by showing the same age same sex pair who are devoted to each other I hoped to intervene in that discussion. For me, I still really want this to be used in outreach in schools in some way that would make life easier for struggling youth – not that all queer

youth are struggling, but the suicide statistics in [the US] are alarmingly high for gay youth. My students at Hamilton think everything is ok, but they're mostly very rich and in a very protected environment, and kids in high school are different. I think an academic article was never going to do that, even though that was what I was going to do, or a book on Orestes through the ages, that was never going to do any of that.

**MB:** As David mentioned, trying to think about the way these stories have a long history, how to tell all of it, and especially how it fits through time and how they could be useful or impactful now, was really important for me when I was writing that text [that David mentioned]. It was initially just an exercise for me to try to figure out if I thought these characters were useful for a queer politics, more than just as representatives of a family going through intense trauma and revenge. Is that the story that we want to be telling now, with a positive use for queer people and wider than just male-male desire? Interestingly that's one of the things we shied away from critiquing the most, both whether or not the desire is present, and if we take it as given then what does that mean when we restage it. I felt it was important when I was writing to think about what Pylades might say – he's famously very silent, with that one line: 'do it Orestes, kill her!' My focus was on him, was to allow him the ability to voice his story. I think that if I was to rewrite that text now I would want to confront what I think plays like *The Inheritance* are doing, which is positioning a privileged male who expressed male-male desire in his writing, E. M. Forster, as this originating character that guides the rest of the people through the narrative. The *Iliad* was a big part of my ability to conceptualise my same-sex desire – it was my first encounter with that. I grew up in a country where same-sex desire was openly and ruthlessly policed, as well as gender non-conformity, and they still are now, so I had no language at all conceptually or verbally for thinking about queer desire or queer presentation that wasn't hate speech. So I was privileged enough to be able to escape that environment and then doubly privileged to have access to the *Iliad* and to speak about it and discuss it in the classroom. But as well as coming across a point of literature and a framework to talk about it, I was also introduced to the entanglement of the study of Greece and Rome and historic privilege, Euro-centric privilege – who gets to read these texts, what do they mean for what kind of people, and who is allowed to talk about and understand them. The often-quoted big names who, like me, found space to explore an erotics of representation were privileged by their whiteness, gender, and class – Andre Gide, Oscar Wilde, John Addington Symonds, Derek Jarman, E. M. Forster, and another list of visual artists and philosophers. It felt right that we were going to be investigating this to challenge it, and we did do some incredible and valuable work in identifying multiple kinds of queerness in this story.

So why us, why now? We do have the skills and tools to identify more queernesses than just male-male desire. We did so with Artemis and Iphigenia's desire for each other, and in Electra's self-assuredness and ability to make a queer intervention into the story that is about her being autonomous and in charge. But I think we have work left to do to confront the potential history of male-male desire in these figures, to ask ourselves if they are useful for us today, and if they're not useful how we can fight back against them.

**CP:** I thought about this question in quite a literal, research-proposal type of way. This mythological story, or cycle, or narrative, is probably one of the most well-known that appears in Greek tragedy from a modern perspective because of the number of versions of it that have survived, and the completeness of Aeschylus's trilogy. My mum knows the story of Orestes, and she knows very little about Classics – so this, and perhaps Oedipus, are the Greek tragedies that people might know. In a way that fits nicely with us as a company having always been interested in canonical texts and what it means to work with them, what the canon is and what it means to shape, subvert, and change and move away from those texts, because of their cultural stature. The stature of this story and the length of the narrative, simply in terms of events that happen from the sacrifice of Iphigenia through to Tauris and afterwards, mean there's a lot of story to work with. A lot of Greek tragedies that survive, divorced from the context of their trilogies, have a crisis point and an event, and there's a lot you can do in adapting that, but there's lots going on in this story, which makes it valuable because you can pick things out and discard things and still have plenty left to work with. And because it's got this cultural cachet, you've got something you can subvert very powerfully, while another play might not have the same resonance in the public imagination. I also think, in terms of 'why us', we're uniquely placed because we've got a diverse range of expertise in our membership – academics and creative practitioners and people straddling both areas – and a unique way of working in a socialist model of a company where we try not to be too top-down about anything that we do but instead everyone can contribute what they want to contribute. That leads to us being able to create a piece of work that has the potential to engage on quite a high level both artistically and academically. I say that because sometimes a critical engagement with a Greek tragedy might not have the artistic engagement, and on the other hand something divorced from the academic context doesn't have the same effect as something coming from our position. So we're well placed to create something that we would hope could be thought-provoking for any audience, but that could be particularly affirming for LGBTQ+ audiences and perhaps a bit disruptive for academic audiences, and blow apart some preconceived notions about what these stories are and can be, about what they should be allowed to do.

**DB:** Why this? I think that connects to this idea of big texts and their meanings, but it also comes back to [what Marcus mentioned,] the idea of *The Inheritance*, a six-hour play positioning itself within queer theatre, or perhaps just gay theatre, as the successor to *Angels in America* as 'the text' that is about the gay experience in the contemporary world. And that featured a single woman in six hours of harping on about the gay experience. As a gay man, that is so contrary to my experience – I'm sure there are gay men for whom that is their experience – but for me women have shaped and are a part of my life. I could probably count the number of my heterosexual male friends on one hand, and even male friends on two and a half hands, there aren't many. But women have shaped my life, and so what I found interesting about this story, and what it enables us to do in thinking about gay or queer experience, to deliberately broaden that back out, is that it has the potential to deal with more than just gay men's experience in relation to Classics, and to think about that hugely important relationship between gay men and women that is uninterrogated by a lot of material that approaches this. I think too that this text is particularly interesting, rather than returning

to, for example, the Achilles and Patroclus narrative – this is a story in which their romance isn't at the centre. They're doing something else, and it just so happens that they're engaged in same-sex desire, and that gives us lots of interesting things to think about, one of which is how do you reconcile giving them a gay-positive, queer-positive storyline without disregarding their obscene act of misogyny-driven murder. So why this – it's a text that does more than a lot of gay or queer theatre at present, certainly Classics-oriented stuff. Why us – as a feminist theatre company we're all invested in wanting to unpack that relationship, and the 'womanness' of the situation, in a way that a lot of the forces at work behind gay or queer theatre today are not. There are people here who can enable us to think about that. Why now – this is the hardest part of the question, but I think it's because we're at a juncture in culture in many ways that is asking us to rethink what the point of the classical is. Politics continues to appropriate the Classics. So what is this classical inheritance that we have, what do these texts mean and should we return to them? I'm always taken by Sue-Ellen Case's very provocative essay 'Classic Drag' from the 80s in which she discusses whether the feminist theatre-maker should be at all interested in these texts or should discard them. Perhaps, in not quite so extreme a way, that's something we're engaging with here: what is the value of these texts at this particular moment? Can we continue on with a legacy of using these texts, given the baggage they have?

**NR:** I've worked so long on this myth, since my senior year of high school, and I've always been thinking about women. When I got to Euripides [*Orestes*] and the traffic in women, my view of the male-male relationships was really from the point of view of how they excluded the women, and what that was about. I've just been looking at the *Women of Trachis* again, and talking to my students about what Heracles is doing at the end when he passes off his concubine to his son. So it was really wrenching for me to find myself thinking about these men who are murderers, and from my dissertation onwards there was no doubt in my mind about the misogyny of the way the whole system is set up. That's the tension. If anybody knows anything, what they know is that the Greeks were queer, and they know that they treated woman badly. So how do we, as a feminist theatre group, engage that, and the relationship between women and gay men, which must also be class- and racially-inflected. So I think we need to do a lot of that, and this play can do that, especially if we do more with Iphigenia's desire for Artemis. What did Artemis give her?: a way out, certainly of the sacrifice, but also of marriage. It's interesting that all the texts have been produced individually, but a collaborative analysis is emerging.

**DB:** Thinking about my own baggage of having worked with this story with this company before – at the end of *Electra-Orestes*, our 2011 engagement with this story, we had Chrysothemis, who we've cut in this project, come out at the end after the trial and Orestes has been acquitted, and say to Electra, I wish you'd had Furies too, it would have been easier for you than this silence and continuity of suffering. Electra doesn't get to process the murder of her own mother in the same way as Orestes is allowed to do in in lots of different and quite awful ways in all these texts written by Aeschylus and co. What's interesting about this project, which we've begun to do with *Electra* and we could do more with all the characters,



is to allow these characters to have a chance to process the traumatic things they go through and situate that in a context where there are also queer things happening.

### **Reception and reflection**

**Q: How has the process affected your understanding of the texts/the myth? How do you return to them differently now?**

**NR:** The most immediate thing is that, on the basis of the scene between Artemis and Iphigenia, which I found very moving, I was reminded of the evidence for Artemis' desire for women, and I went back to the myth of Callisto, where Zeus turns himself into Artemis to get access to her nymph, since that implies that she would have accepted sex from Artemis. I wouldn't have thought of this if it hadn't have been for the workshop. Also the possibility of the actual marriage of Electra and Pylades, and what would happen in that case, was very interesting for me. What I think of as the imaginative work took precedence over my initial more ideological bias going into it, which I still have – I still wonder about the power of going back to these myths. I go back because that's what I do – for better or worse you make a career in a field, so why not.

**MB:** I was thinking about these texts as more conservative now than before we started the process, with the misogyny and trauma and the heteronormativity of marriages, but going through this conversation has reminded me of those tensions that exist within classical reception – are we talking about an inheritance, a tradition, and where this work is positioned within it, or in relation to things like *The Inheritance* and *Angels in America*, or in the line of how these plays are received through British playwrights. What I'm thinking about now is that both of those methods, the more linear inheritance and the more 'radical' way of engaging where you pull things apart, are more intertwined with each other than I thought. It's hard to think about working with a text without thinking about those chains of reception that are happening. It's also made me question how queer Orestes and Pylades are to begin with. Having gone through this process, and maybe this is radical, but if we think about queerness as a push for equality that's not here, not now, but in the future wanting more equality for everyone, then I don't think Orestes and Pylades are themselves queer – they fight for themselves – but there are queernesses to be found in the myth.

**NR:** But are they gay?!

**MB:** We can get into that too! Kenneth Dover might say yes, David Halperin would probably say no, Michel Foucault would say something different. It's something we haven't talked about: are they gay? What are we doing when we use that modern language? The word homosexual isn't used until the 1800s – in fact J. A. Symonds is the first person to use it in English – the word gay is later, the word queer is different still in multiple meanings. We're 'always already' making our interventions on these texts just by reading or thinking about them! So in short, how has it affected my understanding? It's broken it!

**CP:** It's done two main things for me. Obviously I knew Greek tragedy was a performance genre, not a text – the text is an element in a bigger performative thing. I think that working in the way we have, very closely with music and movement, has helped me to understand how that performance genre differs from 'conventional' modern theatre. This is me talking from a position of being neither an expert in modern theatre nor an expert in Greek tragedy! But I feel that there's more resonance between the way we are seeking to perform the work that we're in the process of creating, and these texts – which because of the way they've come down to us do not appear like modern play texts, and so there's something disjointed and unusual in their appearance. We're also working with a different kind of text, and how you translate meanings through music and movement as well as through spoken language. That's opened me up to thinking about how that might have worked for the ancient audiences. That became very immediate for me. The other thing was something I always used to say to schoolkids when I was doing outreach talks about the differences between comedy and tragedy, that tragedy is about big questions and big ideas, and that comedy is about the here and now, and politics. Obviously that's a very simplified version. But I would also always say that the big ideas were things like fate, or how the gods have a hold over our lives, and we have to play out the stories that are given to us, and that those things might not be so relevant in the modern world. Now, I've been thinking about how, if I were to boil down an overarching idea like that in the work we've been doing, there's something about how moral frameworks fit or don't fit into real life, which I think is something that is in the original and is still very present in the modern world – how moral, social, cultural ideals of living can or can't be lived up to, and how they can push people in different directions. So I've been thinking about how the big questions that Greek tragedy was asking might not be so distant as I have at times thought that they are.

**MB:** I think from that, one useful thing is that it's not a queer tragedy – the tragedy of these plays isn't that they're queer. They're tragedies because of the things that happen in them, and alongside that there's queer life and queer existences that are part of that, but aren't the tragedy of it.

**NR:** I've worked with Rhodessa Jones – she works with women in prison and what she tries to do is get the women to have a sense that they're part of a bigger story. That's where the myths come in for her. The project is called the Medea Project, because it started with a woman who was in a crack-cocaine-induced state and killed her children in a fight with her husband. So to give her the story of Medea is to say that this is bigger, and to ask what are the forces that are at work in our world – it's not the gods. But the way it feels now at the [US] border is horrendous, so the immigrant story resonates – you have the sense of the bigger players, like the gods, taking your life over. My students think that they're so free and they're choosing all of these things, and they realise that they're privileged and that poor people don't have so many choices, but they still don't realise where they are being controlled in unseen ways. So this line of thought is really important.

**DB:** One of the questions I always think is raised by tragedy is what it must have been like to be an Athenian man watching these plays year after year, not just one but nine plays of similar mythic episodes with tragic endings – obviously with Euripides and others mixing

things up – and then in other parts of your life you have a wife and possibly male lovers, or you’ve had them in the past, and you go to war and know people whose male lovers might have died. I always think a large part of what tragedy is doing, when I think about these people, is to help them process life and death, but in a cosmic context, where they can watch these stories play out where their kinds of sufferings and traumas are playing out but in a context where the gods explicitly do exist, they are present and they’re going to come down at the end and say something. It’s an imaginary that can play out. In some ways this is a queer text because part of what is bound up in the story is the legacy of the feminine, the power of the feminine, and its role within the power structures of society. The tragedy at the end of the *Oresteia*, in a reading going back to Simone de Beauvoir and before, is that it’s the triumph of the patriarchy over the matriarchy, it’s the triumph of male authority and all the things that come with that over the female. There’s something tragic there in terms of a queer reading, in the sense that what we end up with at the end of the plays is an Orestes who has to shut down and put away all of the feminine, and has to completely reject it. In terms of how I think differently about these texts – the other day I watched the new quartet of plays by Caryl Churchill at the Royal Court. I thought they were remarkable, first of all, but second of all, the second play of that quartet, *Kill*, is a monologue delivered by, in this case, a man, that is the story of the House of Tantalus and the Atreids. It’s without any of those names attached – I think the most Greek we get is a name-drop for Zeus and Poseidon – but it recounts the generations of violence that happen. It starts with a phrase like ‘we put Furies in the box’, so it starts with *Eumenides*, and it goes backwards in time up to Tantalus, and then back down to the Furies again and back up in a really masterful way, going back up and down over this trauma, and ends with the figure saying ‘stop it! Please stop telling this story!’ because it’s just this endless cycle of violence bouncing up and down the generations. I think, having just done all the work we had, it made me think about the story in a new way, and rethink versions of the *Oresteia* I had seen in the last five-ish years in relation to our work on it. Is this a story just about violence and murder and killing? It is, until you put the silent characters back in. The story of murder is in the main, male, patrilineal narrative, and yes, there are women who are accomplices in it, most notably Clytemnestra, but it’s mainly the male story. But when you bring Pylades back in, the silent character, or you bring Electra back in, it begins to mutate the story in new, potentially queer directions – the presence of Pylades and reading him as queer, or gay, changes how you read Orestes, and the presence of Electra changes how you read the narrative. I was thinking about how Robert Icke’s *Oresteia*, which was perhaps the most prominent one in recent years, was a brilliant piece of theatre in many ways, but he cut Pylades and Electra – Electra was a repressed version of Orestes, a projection of his psychosis – and it was just about Orestes, and so I thought it was inherently more boring, aside from the bells and whistles of the actual production, which was very accomplished, and Leah Williams was a brilliant Clytemnestra. Aside from that, it was a much more vanilla version of the *Oresteia*, and so much more simplified, and I’ve often criticised that production because it tries to do an [Ariane] Mnouchkine/Katie Mitchell thing by prefacing it with *Iphigenia at Aulis*, but at the end doesn’t grapple with Athena’s vote and the misogyny of that, whereas the Mnouchkine and Mitchell readings that came before, and our reading, did grapple with that and its ramifications. That production built on feminist

dramaturgies but ignored the big feminist question at the end, and I've realised through working on this project that it does that because it cuts off Electra and Pylades. If you cut those characters, you reduce your critical capacity to deal with the misogyny and the big issues in this text, which are bound up in it.

**MB:** As we're still discovering now, there are so many different kinds of queerness that we can identify in the text – ways of identifying, ways of interfering or intervening in the text itself.

**NR:** It's safer to call it same-sex desire, because it's in the service of patriarchy. Pylades lines right up with Apollo and says go for it, kill your mother. This is why sometimes I think feminist theory and queer theory get into fights, and there's a potential homophobia in certain feminist writing, because there's that way in which privileged men have had this option for same-sex desire and it has not interrupted patriarchy.

**MB:** And if it's misogynistic, then how queer is it really?