

Suhayla El-Bushra: I was already familiar with the story of Iphigenia, because I played a chorus member in a community centre production of Sophocles' *Electra* when I was about 17 or 18. My feminist ire was ignited by the injustice of Clytemnestra's treatment, both by her family and throughout history. I couldn't believe that I'd only just found out about this woman who waited for years to murder her husband, understandably in my eyes, because he killed their child. I was also furious at her kids, Electra and Orestes, for their hatred of her after she'd avenged their sister's death – it just seemed like a very unjust story. At university I studied Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and my rage was awakened again, but still it was Clytemnestra who I really felt for, and I started to see her as a bit of a feminist icon, and I didn't really give much thought to Iphigenia. So when Chris Haydon [artistic director of the Gate Theatre] asked if I'd tell the story from Iphigenia's point of view, and not her mother's, I felt a bit disappointed. I'd always seen her as a pawn, and a victim, and I didn't really think [there was] much more to her than that.

But when I read *Iphigenia at Aulis*, it gave me a completely different perspective on her: in this version, Iphigenia goes to her death willingly after delivering a barnstorming speech in which she vows to sacrifice herself to save all Greek women from Trojan tyranny. I'd never thought of her actions as being particularly empowering before, but it seemed that she was a feminist icon herself. Around that time I'd been doing some research for a film project on female war reporters in the Arab Spring, and I'd read about a woman called Nour Kelze who was a young Syrian woman in Aleppo who'd been a teacher, but once [President] Assad started bombing her city, she started to go out and document his destruction. She posted photos and maps of dangerous areas online for the free Syrian army to follow, and ended up working for Reuters. When she was asked why she endangered her life in this way, she pointed out that in Aleppo, young women run the risk of getting blown up as they do the dishes in their own kitchens, and she said 'why should I die cheap?' – a phrase that really stuck with me. It ended up in the play, because it seemed like a slogan that was worthy of Iphigenia.

So I decided that I'd tell the story of Iphigenia as a freedom fighter who, when faced with the destruction of her people, fought back with nothing left to lose. But when I sat down to write it another story came out entirely, and I ended up with the first draft being more a study of the relationship between a pampered rich girl and her ineffectively liberal mother. I realised that I couldn't write about Nour Kelze and Syria, because in my eyes Nour was fully justified in fighting Assad's forces, but I didn't believe the same was true of Iphigenia. Despite her thinking that she was empowering herself and all young women, it was clear to me that she was being manipulated in order to justify the invasion of another country.

I had to go back to the drawing board, and think about who Iphigenia was and who she would be today. There was a really obvious parallel between an ancient Greek teenager who was radicalised into sacrificing her life for a political cause, and young people today who are fleeing to become jihadi brides and join ISIS, but I didn't want to tell that story. It felt much more interesting to reverse that angle, and to think about how the West uses anti-Islamic rhetoric to justify military intervention in certain countries. I started to think about foreign

policy, and how for centuries the battle for women's bodies has been used as a validation for invading other countries, from India to Sudan to Afghanistan. Criticism of the way those cultures treat their women has often been bandied about to justify colonialism, not to mention racism, and this is from countries whose own track records when it comes to gender relations are far from perfect, so it felt to me like a really rich and complex territory to explore. So I had to ask myself what being a woman in the West meant, and what do we have that's worth defending – freedom, for example: yes, to a certain extent. But we still experience sexism and violence, and our society is tipped more favourably towards men despite our efforts to achieve equality. Which led me to question how we cling to liberal values when we live in a world that seems increasingly violent and polarised, when progressive ideas are instantly dismissed. I felt that this is what lies at the heart of Iphigenia's story. She's a young woman who is caught up in the battle between two very distinct ideologies – the angry, imperialist propaganda of her father and the kinder, possibly misguided liberalism of her mother – masculine versus feminine, mum versus dad – and there you have a very contemporary global conflict that you can play out around a family dining table.

I felt that you couldn't write a story from Iphigenia's perspective without acknowledging the effect her mum and dad have on her. She's a product of them both. So I made the decision to have her be silent for most of the play until her final big speech at the end, so we can see what those two influences really were on her. Iphigenia makes a lot of choices based on the behaviour that she sees in her parents.

I grew up in the nineties, and things, when I look back on it, seemed simpler and a bit more progressive. I feel like [my generation has] taken our eye off the ball, and now there are a lot of less progressive things happening in the world. Clytemnestra represents that, for me – she talks to her daughter but she doesn't really listen to her. Iphigenia quite scathingly sees her as the weak victim of her father's physical abuse, rather than, as I might see her, as a brave woman who took his blows to protect her children. [Iphigenia] doesn't want to be like her, and she ultimately rejects that vision of femininity and swallows her father's doctrine, convinced that he's right. Now, he's not right, I don't think, and never have done, which is why, after he gives his very impassioned speech, where he puts his own spin on the story, I felt it was really important that the final image of the play was Iphigenia with her throat slit and her white dress saturated in blood, to tell a very different story to the one that she misguidedly believes. It's a very dark ending, but to me, it's an ending that offers a warning, really, to my generation, to older generations, about what information and what lessons we teach the next generation, and what they're going to learn from us.

Chris Thorpe: My process of writing the *Chorus* was probably quite different to [Suhayla's], in that I didn't feel like it was entirely necessary for me as a writer to have to tell the story. Because I was given the luxury of being able to look at the story from the perspective of the people in the story who were looking at it, that freed me up to do something which I like to do when I write translations, which is to think of what I'm doing, not as a simple translation of story or of structural elements that have to occur in a certain order for the story to be understood, but to think of the whole task as a translation of intent. I've translated four or five contemporary European plays, and I try to run the line between the integrity of the original story and the need to allow that story to be understood in the context of the [receiving] society, while also if necessary giving [the audience] as much historical and social information as they

need to understand the context in which it was originally written. But the intention is always to replicate the intended effect on an audience that the original script had in its original language. I have been very lucky to be able to work with every single writer who I've translated personally, usually for an extended period of time, to really drill down into those questions, not just about the idiomatic speech or the social position of various characters in the context it was originally written in, but what their intention was in telling this story at the time and in the way they told it. I realised when I was tasked with doing the *Chorus* that, while that's useful to be able to do with contemporary plays, it is a way of simply avoiding the inconvenient fact that the person who wrote the original play is still alive – it's a way of coping with that. There's certainly a freedom which comes from being able to divorce yourself from questions like that, and actually to say not what is the function of this story in its original context, but what is the function of this particular structural dramatic part of the story, in this case the chorus, and how can that be created now in a changed way.

When I got to the part where I actually had to start making decisions and write the play, I shut my word processing application and I opened up my web browser and I went on Reddit because writing plays is hard and I'm lazy. So I decided to avoid doing it. [Reddit is] a social information-sharing platform where people can put up links to things that they find interesting, and those links are categorised into subreddits, smaller parts of Reddit which have a particular focus. It might be the Miami Dolphins, the sports team, or it could be London, or it could be pictures of naked Scandinavian women, or it could be, in this case, watch[ing] people die. The subreddit entitled 'Watch People Die' was referenced in an article that I was reading, and I thought, that sounds interesting, I'll click on that, I'll see what these people are interested in. Right now on the subreddit 'Watch People Die', the top-rated contributions for today are [*he reads from his phone*] – 'ISIS Suicide Bomber Hits IED, Car is Launched into the Air, Suicide Bomber Detonates Himself in Mid-Air' – sounds a bit slapstick. 'Burning Man Jumps Off a Bridge' – from the thumbnail, that appears to be a news report from – I can't tell where, it looks like somewhere in Eastern Europe. 'Vintage Speedway Accident, Poland Versus Austria, Vienna, 1956' – so it's not just contemporary deaths they're interested in, this is someone, I would imagine, meeting a sticky end in a motorcycle race... 'New Islamic State Executions, May 10th' – a little compendium, I imagine, of videos there. 'Taliban Hit by A-10 Warthog Gun' and 'Aftermath of Horrible Fatal Road Accident in Egypt'.

It's quite opportune that I came across those at the time that I did, because they focused my attention on what the functionality of a chorus is now. This isn't a niche part of the internet that I visited – this is a site which is one of the top ten most popular websites in the world and it's a part of that site that you can look at without being a member. But also, in terms of its subscriber base, this part of the site currently has somewhere between 80,000 and 100,000 active subscribers, so I would imagine the number of people who view it is far larger than that. So due to the lucky confluence of Euripides not being around to tell me where I was going wrong, my own laziness, and the fact that I happened to be thinking about this choric function, it became apparent to me that the modern version of the chorus is us, effectively, or at least the part of us that most of us share, that we use to absorb and then to retransmit opinions pertaining to events that happen to people that we don't know. Usually famous people get the most collective response, and probably the cruellest. Usually episodes of great stress, either emotional, familial, or episodes of violence and death; and usually ones that involve the kind

of people who society in general is either sexually interested in or most interested in punishing for supposed transgressions, so young women. Immediately, we can see parallels both with the choric function in the original drama and with Iphigenia herself.

I wrote [the play] in two hundred four-line non-rhyming verses. There were certain things that I really wanted to preserve from Don Taylor's translation, which was the translation that I worked on. I think there is a useful thing in using language which has a sense of detachment and distance already in it, and I would argue that the language that he uses, because of its rhythmic nature and poetic form, contains a detachment and distance that I found very useful. I didn't want to ape that language, [or] use the meter or the rhyme that he uses in his translation, partly because I wanted to feel freer to be able to take this writing where it needed to go, but also because I felt that there were references to things in the original Greek text – to rhythms, to forms of poetry - that I am not really conversant with, so it felt like I would be attempting to do an impression of someone else's impression of some source material that I can't be familiar with. But that's how it came out – there were no voices, there were no specific people referenced as the kind of performers who should be saying this text, but I embedded the idea of a variety of people saying this text, the idea that the fact that the majority of the world, by virtue of observing things online or through the media, are complicit in at least a form of this kind of behaviour. Because even if you're not a fan of 'Watch People Die', the same beheading videos are embedded in the front page sites of major national newspapers all over the world. The way that I put that complicity into it was having ten stanzas throughout that do rhyme, and that have got a very specific rhythm, and that locate the people speaking in various bodies and various functions throughout the world.

Geraldine Brodie: So far we've tended to look at these plays as discrete units, but the plays – and there are four plays – are linked together by the fact that they are staged on the same evening, and the two pairs have the same actors playing different but complementing roles. Each of you is, to some extent, commenting on each other's work. How much were you aware of that when you were writing, and did that make a difference to your approach? And how do you feel about it now that you've seen them all produced?

SE-B: The style of the pieces hasn't changed from the first drafts that we wrote individually – mine and Caroline's were much more straight, narratively, and I think Chris's and Lulu's were a bit more abstract and experimental, and that was something that we did independently of each other. And actually watching them together on two consecutive nights is very interesting, because I think they really complement each other, and it works to have a more straightforward telling of the story, and then to have a slightly abstracted version afterwards. I think with Chris's, it's nice that they're talking about characters that we've just seen, but they're not those characters, so you're not seeing those characters again but you're hearing people talk about them, and you can conjure them up.

Emma Cole: Were they always going to be in those pairings, or was that a decision made later on?

SE-B: I think that was made later, it wasn't made straight away.

CT: I imagine it was Chris Haydon who made those decisions, and he's put them together very intelligently. It's interesting, the different levels of knowledge in the audience – without Suhayla's play before it, the level of knowledge of the source material needed for mine would probably shift up a little bit, and you would lose some people. That's not that [Suhayla's] is

simpler than mine, it's just because of the form of mine and what it's saying. You would know what it was about and what was happening, but I would say the narrative is far more obscured.

EC: Chris, about the ending of your play. Did you attempt to engage with the Euripidean ending? The *Iphigenia at Aulis* ending is often thought of as being written by someone else. It strikes a very strange tone where the messenger comes on and says, 'It's ok guys, everything's fine, [Iphigenia did not die but rather] turned into a deer!' A lot of people don't know how to read that ending. I see the messenger's speech as a very ironic way of ending the play, something not meant to be taken seriously. Without knowing about this subreddit thread, I read your ending in the performance as engaging with that sense of an ironic ending.

CT: It's deliberate, in that, in terms of the kind of voice that the chorus have, and the way that I see the real contemporary chorus that is now all around us, one of the worst things you could do to that collective consciousness is to take it on a journey and then stop that journey before the climactic point. That is something that will cause that voice to shut down, to reject you, to be actively hostile towards you, you being the creator of a narrative that that voice is consuming, whether that's a TV programme that becomes extremely popular and then cuts off halfway through the sixth season, or whether it's a fight between two celebrities that is unexpectedly resolved with a hug and a benefit concert. It's unfulfilling for that part of the world that observes and that wants to see things end – not necessarily even badly, but conclusively, with triumph or disaster, so it's definitely a reference to that. But also the frustration that I feel with the play, which is that – and this is my own personal thing, I'm not making a kind of observation of the dramaturgy of the play – but I really hate the way it ends, because as a writer, you shouldn't be allowed to get away with that – for all that it might have had a social or political function in the original context, now it just reads as someone who didn't know how to end the play. I think I've created an ending which is an attempt to replicate that frustration, or at least express my frustration.

Audience Member: [In Suhayla's version] Agamemnon says 'it is not for man to interpret the will of the gods into reason; they want what they want.' I didn't feel like he had the dilemma that he has in the Euripidean text, and so when he tells Achilles to get Iphigenia and go, and when he comes back on stage with Clytemnestra and we see him changing his mind, we don't know what happened. Was it genuine that he changed his mind?

SE-B: I think for him the reversal comes when Clytemnestra talks about Iphigenia and how he felt about her when she was born - it's that moment of him remembering how he felt about her as a baby that brings about his change of heart. So when you next see them, they're not warring, they're back together as a couple. It's interesting because when we were rehearsing we looked at it, and if you think about the language that he uses when he tells Iphigenia to go, it's not reassuring her that everything's going to be fine, it's 'we'll be hanging from the trees in shreds – off you go! Don't worry about us.' So it's obvious that he doesn't really want her to go.

Audience Member: Chris, you were talking about the translation you were working from and how it had this detached perspective, and I wanted to know what you meant by detached. Does it have anything to do with our ability to empathise with Iphigenia, or the situation?

CT: There's a really great quality to it which, when you read it, even if you don't know the original qualities of the source text, feels declamatory and poetic and, even though some of the language is contemporary, runs really contrary to the tradition of psychological realism and motivation in characters. It detaches me as a reader from the idea that I have to understand the

interior life of these people, and I think there's a very interesting parallel now in the way that we look at – I don't know, pick a random person – Miley Cyrus. I have no interest in her existence in the world – I have very little interest in her, but a lot of people do, but I would argue they don't have any interest in her as a psychologically complex being going through a personally experienced daily life. What they have in her is a canvas onto which they can project their own inadequacies, fears, joys, fantasies. I think there's something about the language of the translation that encourages you to do that with these characters. It's much easier to get that distance than if I'd been presented with a version of it that was written along the lines of psychological naturalistic drama.