

Greek hero: how Robert Icke made his three-hour courtroom drama *Oresteia* as relevant as ever

A three-hour-long Ancient Greek play? It sounds dry, but Robert Icke's Oresteia felt thrillingly fresh. Claire Allfree meets the Best Director winner and discovers why the original courtroom drama is as relevant as ever

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The photographer on set is joshing with Robert Icke about his floppy hair and the prospect of make-up. The panicked look in Icke's eyes suggests he isn't sure it's really a joke. 'My mum has spent 28 years trying to smarten me up,' he says, pointing to his jeans and black sweater. 'There's a reason why I work behind the scenes. I'm not an "out front" type of man.'

Icke, 28, may be uncomfortable in the spotlight, but his incendiary, dazzlingly intelligent productions have made him impossible to ignore (first with Headlong theatre company and for the past two years for the Almeida under his old friend, its artistic director Rupert Goold). He has just been crowned Best Director at the Evening Standard Theatre Awards in partnership with The Ivy for his knock-out production of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the blood-soaked Ancient Greek trilogy about a family locked into a murderous cycle of revenge, adapted by Icke into a single, modern, three-hour show. Hailed by the critics as 'revelatory,' it transferred to the West End in August after a sell-out seven-week run in Islington. Not bad for a film buff who has an original poster of *The Shining* in his Dalston flat and is yet to hit 30.

'We wanted something that left the audience feeling deeply uncomfortable,' he says, of why he and Goold revived the 2,500-year-old trilogy, the first in a six-month summer season of Ancient Greek tragedies at the Almeida that included *Bakkhai* and *Medea*. 'And we wanted something that set out what theatre can be. We had in mind the RSC when they staged John Barton's *The Wars of the Roses*, which felt like a real epoch-defining moment.' The parallels are striking: not only did Barton's 1963 production bring fresh relevance to the historic works of Shakespeare in the way *Oresteia* has done, revitalising the classical theatre scene, but it was co-directed by Peter Hall, who founded the RSC as a precocious 29-year-old.

In Icke's new version the original play's terrible cycle of guilt and revenge — which begins with Klytemnestra killing her returning warrior husband Agamemnon for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia during the Trojan war and ends with her son Orestes being tried for her murder — became an urgently contemporary story. There are shades of *The Sopranos* and *House of Cards* (Icke even says he had the ultimate statesman-like couple, the Clintons, and their much-publicised marital disputes in mind for Klytemnestra and Agamemnon). He placed the Iphigenia story centre stage so that Agamemnon's epic dilemma — whether to sacrifice his child or his people — became the most explicit example of the moral ambiguity found in every corner of the play. 'I wanted the audience to know what that mindset might feel like where you are faced with having to kill your child.'

As part of his research, last year Icke attended the Old Bailey sentence hearing of Tania Clarence, the mother from New Malden who admitted manslaughter by diminished responsibility after killing her three disabled children, a four-year-old daughter and three-year-old twin sons. 'I was really struck by why *The Oresteia*, the first great play in the Western canon, should be a courtroom drama. And the thing about a court — and the thing we asked our audience to do with Orestes' trial — is that it asks you to make a binary choice: yes or no. Guilty or innocent. But, of course, the judgement often also leaves you feeling profoundly unresolved.'

Some commentators have drawn comparisons with the spiral of violence in the play and that in the Middle East. 'Of course the glib contemporary response is that, well, it's like Tony Blair before going to war in Iraq, isn't it, you just need an excuse to do something,' says Icke. 'But the Iphigenia myth isn't simply about political expediency but a really profound act of sacrifice. Agamemnon knows killing his daughter will destroy him. Yet he also knows that's what leadership is.'

Icke, who plays the piano to relax, has the habits of a scholar. Last summer he spent two weeks holed up in King's College, Cambridge, where he'd studied English as an undergraduate, to work on the original Greek text, firing off notes to his former tutor Simon Goldhill about the odd few bits he didn't understand. Icke grew up in Stockton-on-Tees where his early experience of theatre extended to his comprehensive school's production of *A Tale of Two Cities*. His 'Damascene' moment came aged 15 when his dad tore him away from his PlayStation to see Kenneth Branagh in Michael Grandage's *Richard III* at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre (Icke had never heard of Branagh and had never read *Richard III*).

The experience compelled him to write to Grandage to ask him how he did it. Grandage obligingly wrote back, inviting him to come and meet him. The result 'was basically two hours' worth of practical and philosophical [advice] about theatre and actors and rehearsals — at that point I'd never set foot in a rehearsal room,' says Icke.

His career since has been marked by a similar enquiring single-mindedness. He went to Cambridge primarily because of the student theatre scene, but found it 'way too pleased with itself'. After graduation, he went back to Stockton and set up his own theatre company, Arden, playing to locals who had 'an almost chippy aversion to any form of snobbery and to the idea of high culture'. As a result he has an unshakeable desire to cut away anything that assumes prior knowledge. 'If you are doing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to an audience who do not know Bottom turns into a donkey, their reaction is completely other to that of someone who says, "Oh, I wonder how they are going to do that bit." I wanted to do an *Oresteia* for Simon Goldhill but also my little brother, who is a very smart bloke but who isn't going to know what a Greek chorus is or a libation. And why should he? These things no longer mean anything to us.'

Icke admits that he finds most contemporary theatre boring. He has a particular aversion to revivals that make no attempt to connect with the present moment. 'Putting people in doublet and hose only leaves the play feeling distant and alien. Because even if you try to replicate *Hamlet*, you can't replicate an audience from 1601. So it's always going to be an inauthentic experience.'

In February Icke is back at the Almeida directing his new version of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*; it won't contain the usual men and women in white linen suits leaning against birch trees. Instead, he has gone back to the original Russian text and says that what he has found buried beneath decades of translation has made him completely rethink the central relationship between Vanya and his niece Sonya. 'The word radical actually means to go back to the root,' he says. 'My responsibility is always to the impulse of the original play, to clear away the accumulated dust of its performance history. So much of great drama was profoundly troubling when it was first done. They rioted at Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, for goodness sake. Audiences shouldn't be allowed to feel nothing.'