

# ORESTEIA: PRESS RESPONSES

Almeida and West End (2015)

Aeschylus in a new adaptation created by Robert Icke

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## SUNDAY TIMES

Maxie Szalwinska

★★★★★

The director Robert Icke performs revelatory surgery on Aeschylus' epic revenge trilogy. His *Oresteia* is an object lesson in merciless ambivalence. This is theatre-making that rearranges the audience's understanding of mythic characters, pulling off nuance as well as heft. You're aware of the production's quality of ethical reflection even as you're shaken by its storm-force domestic feuding: right and wrong are shown to be a hair's breadth apart or impossibly tangled.

Icke's adaptation keeps the core of the tragedies intact: Agamemnon, who killed his daughter Iphigenia to win the Trojan War, is murdered by his wife Klytemnestra, then avenged by his son, Orestes. The smoked-glass doors on Hildegard Bechtler's blankly stylish, increasingly eerie modern set slide to and fro, revealing what could be Orestes' screen memories or personal psychodrama. He's cobbling together his past with the help of an interrogating doctor, probably for courtroom evidence, and time is running out.

The staging is devastatingly grounded by its domestic detail: dinner-table backchat and bathtime with daddy turn ominous. The actors find the beast within every character, without making any of them monsters: Klytemnestra (Lia Williams, never more judicial or lacerating) even admits that a part of her admires her husband's resolve. 'When did we decide that the right thing always feels right?' asks Angus Wright's stricken Agamemnon before giving the child on his lap a fatal overdose. The rightness of Icke's staging lies in the way it leads us into squirming moral terror.

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## MAIL ON SUNDAY

Georgina Brown

★★★★★

Open the papers and the familiar, appalling stories of a husband murdering his wife or a mother killing her child leave one reeling. But what should society do with such murderers, who are arguably of no danger to anyone else? Do their actions stem from biology, density or a sense of balance? Can our justice system provide the appropriate punishments?

Robert Icke's contemporary, exhilarating adaptation of Aeschylus' ancient and bloody Greek tragedy considers such matters with great intelligence and clarity. Moreover, an unusually lengthy production grips with such a terrifying intensity and immediacy that it's over before you know it.

His remarkable achievement is to make the ordinary extraordinary, the domestic epic, and vice versa, over and over again. Visually and verbally. So the marbled bathroom behind the glass screens in Agamemnon's mansion is the most normal place imaginable for him to soak when he gets home from a tough day, as his little daughter, Iphigenia, companionably sings a song to her daddy. Later it's still a bathroom but a place of ritual slaughter, where his wife Klytemnestra (a stunning, compelling Lia Williams) cuts his throat, his punishment for killing Iphigenia in a deal for winning the Trojan war.

The calmly civilised and brutally barbaric are again inextricably entwined in the conversation in which Agamemnon (an anguished Angus Wright) is persuaded by political adies that his child's death ('It's not suffering. It's just absence') is for the greater good. The conversation is infinitely more disturbing than the shockingly quiet killing itself.

That one action can be both paradoxically 'good' and 'bad' is powerfully spelled out in the early scene in which the family have dinner, a symbolic Last Supper on a white tablecloth and with red wine. Iphigenia refuses to eat the deer - 'It's really sad', she whines. Klytemnestra says the animal died in order for them to live.

She doesn't feel quite the same when her own little deer gets the same treatment. Nor do Klytemnestra's surviving children, Orestes (Luke Thompson) and Electra (Jessica Brown Findlay, in a fine stage debut), when their mother exacts her vengeance on their father. In a fascinating final

scene, staged in a court of law, with all the characters playing lawyers, Orestes is acquitted of the crime he commits to avenge his father's death. His punishment? His guilt. Arguably the inescapable human condition, nailed superbly.

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**THE TIMES**  
**Kate Basset**  
★★★★★

We're told that Agamemnon, as a crusading military commander, has excelled at "moving the borders", but he has also crossed a taboo-breaking line in his family life. Having killed one of his own children — believing this will ensure his enemies' defeat — Agamemnon has lit a fuse that will surely lead to his own death at the retributive hands of his wife, Clytemnestra.

What proves electrifying about the dramatist-director Robert Icke's new modern-dress adaptation of the *Oresteia*, the Almeida's latest, superb West End transfer, is how radically yet intelligently this rewrite departs from the original structure of Aeschylus's Ancient Greek trilogy.

Most poignantly, Icke's subtly poetic four-act drama envisages the initial tragedy of Iphigenia's death (which Aeschylus's chorus only relays as the backstory). So now we see Angus Wright's Agamemnon as he tries to steel himself for war and filicide.

A smart-suited chief of state and a loving but stressed-out father at home, he is fundamentally convinced that his religious faith is guiding his actions, yet he is racked with moral doubt and grief. The scene where he cradles the infant Iphigenia in his arms — weeping and kissing her hair as she innocently waggles her toes and he feeds her a lethal concoction of chemicals — is heartbreaking.

Icke's production is deceptively simple at first glance: a curving brick wall, a minimalist white supper table, a misted glass screen (set design by Hildegard Bechtler). The acting is mostly hushed. This is intimately observed, painfully recognisable domestic realism, but with ferocious explosions of fury and ecstasy and with hallucinatory elements overlaid by a haunting web of sound (choral singing and distant mortar thuds compiled by Tom Gibbons).

Lia Williams is absolutely riveting as Clytemnestra, given far more space to be sympathetic than in Aeschylus, but also fascinatingly slippery in her language once disillusioned. Although not quite as searing as her or Wright, Jessica Brown Findlay as Electra is almost Hamlet-like in her philosophical brooding on how to mourn her father.

And, although it might be pared a little, Icke's additional device is clever too. Framing everything as the unreliable recovered memories of Luke Thompson's traumatised Orestes — on trial for matricide — this adaptation brilliantly weaves in worries about our modern justice system and our psyches as well as reflecting the never-ending process of the Greek legends being rewritten.

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**TIME OUT**  
**Andrzej Lukowski**  
★★★★★

Robert Icke does it again with this searing, superb version of Aeschylus's ancient play.

What a piece of theatre this is: writer-director Robert Icke follows up his remarkable stage reworking of Orwell's 'Nineteen Eighty-Four' with an even more remarkable reworking of Aeschylus's 'Oresteia' trilogy.

The first play in the Almeida's 'Greeks' season, 'Oresteia' is a root-and-branch transformation of Aeschylus's 458BC version of the fall of the House of Agamemnon, with the language, morality and much of the storytelling almost entirely Icke's. The shattering first section takes an hour to tell the story of Greek general Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, events that are only briefly reported at the start of the original 'Oresteia'.

It's hard to know where to begin, other than perhaps to note that yes, it is very long – three hours and 40 minutes – but it flows by like a waking dream: the three intervals are more welcome as a means of catching your breath than anything else. Icke has nicked more than a few tricks from the great Belgian director Ivo van Hove – the minimal contemporary staging with techy flourishes, the constantly, elegant swell of music, the sense of terrible, primal calm – but he makes it his own,

and certainly 'Oresteia' effortlessly outclasses Van Hove's recent dabble with Greek tragedy, 'Antigone'.

At its core 'Oresteia' works less due to the fancy stuff, more thanks to Icke's searingly modern script and superlative cast. The first part is the simplest and most agonising, as Angus Wright's wry, religious Agamemnon struggles with the mysteriously-imparted knowledge that if he kills his daughter, his troops will triumph over an unnamed enemy, and his wife Clytemnestra (the extraordinary Lia Williams) reacts with a dazed incomprehension, part-angry, part-horrified, part-shellshocked. The awkward 2,500-year-old questions (Who is the enemy? Why do the Greeks need the wind to change to fight them? What is the nature of the prophecy Agamemnon received?) are deliberately set to one side; instead we are left with a cruelly plausible drama about a decent man 'forced' into killing his daughter, and a mother's collapse in the face of that. The quiet scene in which Agamemnon feeds little Iphigenia a cocktail of pills is almost unbearable.

From then on the naturalism is subtly dialled down, as – not unlike '1984' – Icke turns 'Oresteia' into a memory play, with the events that followed (Clytemnestra's murder of her husband and her son Orestes's vengeance upon her) framed as flashbacks inside the troubled, unreliable mind of Orestes (Luke Thompson). There is so much to chew on here: it would be remiss not to flag up Jessica Brown Findlay's surgingly youthful Elektra, to stress how astonishing Williams's performance is, to point to Natasha Chivers's lighting and Hildegard Bechtler's set, which turns the house of Agamemnon into a house of ghosts, as the departed reappear and the living are doubled by reflections.

There is a lot of meaning and ideas squeezed in, but I suppose what I took away the most was an idea that murder and religion are the two characteristics that define humanity, and that they intertwine endlessly through our history. Rudi Dharmalingam's chorus-like Calchas says of the play: 'this has all happened before, and more than once'. But not with this theatrical potency, not in my lifetime, I don't think.

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#### **OBSERVER**

Susannah Clapp

★★★★★

"I felt so alive once I'd killed him." As the husband-slayer Clytemnestra, a magnificent Lia Williams moves catlike from entire poise to unleash a mandrake scream. Her rallying call echoes director Robert Icke's attitude to Aeschylus. His exhilarating adaptation is in part a demolition. It challenges the patriarchal assumptions of the playwright's tragic trilogy. It dispenses with staging conventions. Yet this is not destruction but revelation. You can almost see the dust flying off the old master.

This is the first of the Almeida's season of classical Greek drama, sleekly called *Greeks*, as if they were a band. It is also the first of three stagings of *The Oresteia* (again, the Almeida chic-up the title by dropping the definite article). In August, a new adaptation by Rory Mullarkey will be directed by Adele Thomas at the Globe. Two months later, Blanche McIntyre will direct Ted Hughes's 1999 version at Manchester's Home. Icke gives them an enormous amount to live up to.

The basic features of the revenge cycle are clearly recognisable. The killing of a girl by her father (to gain victory in war); the killing of the father by his wife. The killing of the mother by her son. The acquittal of the son by a civic court. Yet the dramas are refashioned, set in an abstract 21st century, framed as part of an investigation, in which the son, Orestes, is questioned by a therapeutic inquisitor, piecing together evidence. The most vital consequence is that the action has a penumbra of uncertainty. Memories are unreliable; everyone has worthy and self-serving motives; there is no uplifting conclusion. This is brilliantly captured in Hildegard Bechtler's design and Natasha Chivers's lighting. At the back of the stage, where the bath in which Agamemnon is murdered sits like an altar, opaque screens are slid to and fro, misting what is behind them and allowing people to glide like ghosts. In agony, Williams spreadeagles herself there, a black angular figure like a motif on a Greek vase.

Williams has strong support from a loping, rangey Angus Wright as Agamemnon, and Downton Abbey's Jessica Brown Findlay as a huskily intense Elektra, but it's her razor-sharp Clytemnestra whose character is the beneficiary of Icke's remodelling. "This cannot be a place where the woman is less important." It seems to me that Aeschylus's action invites this argument.

Particular reworkings give the action a terrifying immediacy. The backstory of Iphigenia's killing by her father – seen not as "sacrifice" but clinical slaughter – is brought into the main action and given a piercing domesticity. Iphigenia, played with piping assurance by Clara Read, is tiny: her little legs innocently kick as she drinks her fatal dose. In a marvellous touch, the prophetess

Cassandra follows Agamemnon dressed in the same distinctive ochre as his dead daughter. The family's last supper is one of the most realistic, squabbling feasts I have seen on stage.

Icke's language is, particularly compared to Hughes's version, muted. The explosions of viscerality – "strange feathered lumps all over the road" – hit the harder. Purists may object to the lack of the chorus and to the showing of killings onstage. Yet the dark humour of the speech is marvellously captured. As is the contrast between private and public utterance, with video and mics being used – for once – to exceptionally good effect. The individual life versus the greater good. The inescapable consequences of foreign wars and of individual violence. The multiple accounts of one story. All this in one tremendous evening. The surprise is not that there should be a clutch of productions of the trilogy, but that it does not occur more often.

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#### **THE STAGE**

Natasha Tripney

★★★★★

The clock is ticking from the beginning. Robert Icke's reworking of Aeschylus is bold, accessible, resonant and occasionally thrilling in its staging.

This is the first of three major productions, including versions of the Bakkhai and Medea, which form the core of the summer-long Almeida Greeks season, a programme of performances, talks and readings in which contemporary theatre-makers explore the Ancient Greek canon. It's an exhilarating way to start things off. While the production is a long one, running at over three and a half hours (with a number of pauses), it is a thing of fine calibration and the length never feels excessive.

Icke's version of the text is modern and open, straightforward yet elegant in its storytelling. So in the first act we witness Agamemnon's killing of his daughter, Iphigenia, and Klytemnestra raw with grief, howling for her lost child. This frames what is a life-ripe and human production.

There are moments of breath-caught-in-throat tension here – the sequence in which Angus Wright administers the drugs that will end Iphigenia's life is particularly chilling. Nor is Icke afraid of silence, of giving his performers breathing space.

He draws from his cast some fine performances. When interviewed by the media, Lia Williams, in the role of Klytemnestra, is contained and composed, but pain and grief churn beneath the surface and it is only a matter of time before they overspill. Wright, with his rich, deep voice, is statesman-like and upright but he is also capable of conveying great reservoirs of pain. Jessica Brown Findlay – making her stage debut – in the role of Electra is gifted one of the production's quieter speeches but one of its most affecting as she tries to articulate the sting of bereavement, the ache of being unfathered.

Icke dusts his production with horror film imagery. There are sudden, startling blackouts, a couple of nods to Japanese horror – briefly we see Electra and Orestes standing twinned in the window like the girls from *The Shining*, which all feels entirely apt for this bloody cycle of death and retribution. The death of Agamemnon is particularly brutal and haunting, strains of the Beach Boys' *God Only Knows* playing as Klytemnestra advances on him. It's a stunning sequence.

Elements of Hildegard Bechtler's clean minimal design, with its translucent screens and its digital display, its ticking timer, do feel overfamiliar and the production loses energy and momentum in its final act, the trial sequence, but it is here that it is at its most political – making its case as a play for now, living vital theatre – discoursing both on the nature of justice and the nature of stories, our need to keep reworking and retelling them.

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#### **THE TIMES**

Dominic Maxwell

★★★★★

Be honest: does the prospect of three hours and 40 minutes of Greek tragedy thrill you or does it frighten you? The good news — no, the great news — is that Robert Icke's radical adaptation of Aeschylus's trilogy from 458BC is both thrilling enough and frightening enough to make that time zoom by. This *Oresteia* is a stunning start to the Almeida's six-month season of Greek drama.

It boasts a winning stage debut from Jessica Brown Findlay, formerly of *Downton Abbey*, as Elektra. Yet sometimes you have to remind yourself that she, and her stage parents Lia Williams (as the vengeful Klytemnestra) and Angus Wright (as the conflicted Agamemnon), are actually acting, so snugly do they fit inside their characters' skins, so slow are they to raise their voices.

The setting is modern, though Hildegard Bechtler's chic design is spare enough that only television interviews and video screens really insist on the present day. Aeschylus's original starts with Agamemnon returning home from war in Troy before having to face his wife's wrath at how he sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia.

Icke's version adds a 70-minute prequel that dramatises both what led up to that sacrifice and the act itself. This newly minted first act is a masterpiece. As he shows us an ordinary couple arguing over an extraordinary situation — honey, I know how it sounds, but the prophecies suggest that I must kill our little girl — Icke underpins all the mythic resonance here with a razor eye for domestic and psychological detail.

It's the misdirected reasonableness, not the monstrousness, that kills you here as this family sets about its bloodletting. Williams shows us a Klytemnestra with a middle-class calm that (only just) conceals years of inner turmoil. Her passion is contained but hauntingly palpable. She is extraordinary. Wright is tired to his bones as a man whose life consists of choosing between competing evils. Brown Findlay's Elektra is movingly levelheaded as she mourns him, facing up to the lack of any consolations to make up for his absence.

There is no chorus, but Luke Thompson as the son, Orestes, narrates events to a woman we assume to be his shrink. This flashback device can be fiddly, and as we crash through horror-film tropes into the final-act courtroom drama, Orestes questions justice with an earnestness that the rest of the show has managed to shun. Yet the sheer amount of ambition and skill in this quiet riot of theatricality is so great that this still grips, surprises and unsettles throughout. Huge themes, ordinary people, great performances, big success.

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**THE GUARDIAN**  
Michael Billington  
★★★★★

Praise is due to Robert Icke for his boldness in freely adapting Aeschylus's great trilogy, for the visual elan of his production and for some fine performances from a 10-strong cast...

Icke daringly extrapolates from an Aeschylean chorus the drama of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia, in order to prosecute a war. We not only get beautifully staged scenes around the fractious family dinner table, but find striking performances: Angus Wright memorably expresses the mental anguish of a divided leader, while Lia Williams is brilliant as a horrified Klytemnestra who pummels her belly as she cries: "This is my child – part of my body." By placing so much stress on the initial child-murder, Icke also lends weight to the concluding act, in which Orestes is tried for killing Klytemnestra. The case for and against is presented in forensic detail, leaving Orestes technically exculpated – on the grounds that "we favour men in all things" – but haunted by moral guilt.

This is Aeschylus for the modern age, rightly leaving us to draw our own conclusions about the shaky premises on which political leaders go to war... there is no denying the wit and ingenuity of Icke's production. Hildegard Bechtler's design and Natasha Chivers's lighting yield astonishing, deep-focus images. Williams unforgettably conveys Klytemnestra's visceral rage and artful duplicity, and the idea of having Wright play both Agamemnon and his wife's lover, Aegisthus, expresses the circular futility of revenge. It's a stirring production that whets the appetite for an Almeida season that, as Rupert Goold has said, aims to take the Greeks out of the Attic.