

production was scored, with admirable restraint, by Philip Glass, and the score performed by a string quartet seated inconspicuously upstage right. Why *King Lear* needs scoring at all is an open question. Like much in Gold's staging, it felt tacked on.

The bass note of the production was comedy. This was, for better or worse, a pretty funny *King Lear*. Of course, the play itself is interlarded with dark humor and often walks the knife's edge between horror and laughter. Gold consistently milked the humor that was there and sometimes supplied it when it wasn't. Which was interesting, except that it jollied up the audience to a degree that they were predisposed to giggle even when it was no longer called for. That this happened even during the play's final scene points to a problem.

If the play was going to pivot decisively to tragedy at some point—and it had to, let's face it—the burden of this maneuver was necessarily going to fall on Jackson. Unfortunately, she didn't quite pull it off. Part of the problem was that she, like Lear, was caught up in an apparatus she couldn't control. Part of the problem was that Therese Barbató's Cordelia didn't hold up her end of the bargain. But part of the fault was Jackson's own. Her portrayal of Lear was oddly mannered. Her delivery had a bellowing yet sing-song quality through much of the play, and by the time she tried to modulate it, it was already too late. Her face was stretched into a Joker-like grimace most of the time as well. Visually and audially it felt like she was wearing a mask of Lear, much like the masks that ancient Greek tragedians wore. But what worked for Greek tragedy won't work with Shakespeare. Jackson's portrayal played into and abetted the play's comic dimensions but fell short of its tragic ones.

There are still passages of *King Lear* that, after all these years, I cannot read either silently or aloud without tearing up. And yet in this production they left me largely unmoved. Glenda Jackson is a senior and experienced actor, but Sam Gold is a relatively youthful while accomplished and energetic director, and I am not sure he yet feels to his bones what tragedy is. The play's final lines seem to rebuke him: "The eldest hath borne most; we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long."

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THE ORESTEIA. By Ellen McLaughlin, freely adapted from the trilogy by Aeschylus. Directed by Michael Kahn. Shakespeare Theatre Company, Washington, D.C. May 6, 2019.

Michael Kahn staged an absorbing production of *The Oresteia* to conclude his thirty-three-year tenure as artistic director of Washington, D.C.'s Shakespeare Theatre Company. An intuitive and imaginative educator, administrator, and interpreter of classical texts from the Western theatrical canon, Kahn has displayed a remarkable facility for surfacing fresh resonances in works that have captivated and challenged audiences across multiple centuries—from The Oedipus Plays to Corneille's *The Liar*—throughout his career. His production of *The Oresteia* was a close collaboration with actor and playwright Ellen McLaughlin, who freely adapted Aeschylus's epic trilogy, condensing the original's three plays—*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*—into a two-hour-and-twenty-minute event. The performance at once activated debate about the meanings of justice and the possibilities of democracy. It also invited reflection on the ways we might continue to mobilize hope and embody compassion in a moment marked by immense violence, despair, and cruelty.

Among the production's most impactful innovations was the decision to dramatize Agamemnon's (a stately Kelcey Watson) sacrificial murder of Iphigenia (Simone Warren), one of the two children he shares with Clytemnestra (Kelley Curran), in the first act. Agonizingly plotted in Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the catalytic event precedes the action of Aeschylus's tragedy by ten years. Incorporating this backstory into the drama, which was presented in a highly ritualized scene that kept the filicidal act offstage, not only granted greater context for the anguish and rage that Clytemnestra negotiates while awaiting her husband's return home after many years at war but also served to clarify the motivations behind her choice to murder the king. While the consensus among the chorus—portrayed here by a markedly diverse ensemble of eight performers, several with long histories of collaborating with Kahn, including Helen Carey and the formidable Franchelle Stewart Dorn—is that Agamemnon, who returns home with a concubine, Cassandra (Zoë Sophia Garcia), in tow, is a hero, Clytemnestra comes to view him as a thief, one who robs her of time, love, intimacy, and, notably, the tenderness of her beloved daughter. By offering flashes of the deep affection shared between mother and child, movingly portrayed by Curran and Warren, the production revealed just how much had been stolen from the aggrieved queen. Kahn's shrewd direction also made palpable the misery and suffering fueling her



Kelley Curran (Clytemnestra) and Simone Warren (Iphigenia) in *The Oresteia*. (Photo: Scott Suchman.)



The cast of *The Oresteia*. (Photo: Scott Suchman.)

desire to seek revenge, thereby endowing the character and, indeed, the adaptation with additional heft and complexity.

What is perhaps most remarkable about Aeschylus's rendering of the tragedy that befalls the House of Atreus in *The Oresteia*, the only extant ancient Greek trilogy, are the powerful insights it offers about the human capacity for brutality. Kahn's production illuminated just how relevant these insights remain, using the second act's focus on the murder of Clytemnestra by her son Orestes (Josiah Bania) to draw attention to the ways that acts of violence inevitably beget more acts of violence and, in the process, yield additional tragedies. Much like his mother, Orestes patiently waits for an opportunity to carry out his homicidal deed. With the encouragement and endorsement of his sister Electra (Rad Pereira), he commits what he believes is a justified and necessary act of revenge for his father's killing. Bania and Pereira brought tremendous humanity to their respective roles, surfacing the siblings' various ambivalences. Curran, who commanded attention anytime she appeared on stage, matched their intensity and dynamism, which added to the tragedy of Clytemnestra's demise.

If, in the first two acts, characters wrestled with questions of justice somewhat obliquely, the third act witnessed them taking them on more directly.

It was this act that best exemplified the thoughtfulness of McLaughlin's adaptation, which, even while retaining the source material's mix of heightened language and emotionality, registered as remarkably contemporary. It was also this act that brought into focus the timeliness of the production. McLaughlin pruned the original's storylines about the interventions of the gods and the tormenting of Orestes by the Furies to focus the act instead on exploring what might come after the spirits of vengeance have exhausted themselves. The chief challenge facing the community that convened to decide Orestes's fate was determining how best to make sense of and perhaps bring an end to the violence and suffering that had ensnared both the family of the would-be king and their own kin for generations. Instead of furthering the cycle of vengeance that Orestes fell prey to, they chose instead to experiment with a different kind of justice. They arrived at the decision to extend him grace and compassion democratically and, in so doing, exposed the ways that democracy too remains an experiment that requires careful attention and consistent consideration.

Kahn notably enlisted a quintet of award-winning female collaborators, who, in giving shape, color, texture, light, and sound to his stylish reenvisioning of the ancient city of Argos, helped raise the production's stakes. Susan Hilferty's striking

scenic design featured a towering, rusting abode at the center of it that served as a fitting emblem of the corrosiveness afflicting the House of Atreus. Hilferty also supplied the production's costumes, which effectively fused classical and contemporary silhouettes. Clytemnestra's dresses were especially dazzling, with intricate details that sparkled under Jennifer Tipton's evocative, though subdued lighting. They provided a stark contrast to the fibrous uniforms worn by the chorus, whose loose-fitting pants and upper garments were paired with meticulously wrapped headdresses. Sound designer Cricket S. Myers and composer Kamala Sankaram helped amplify the tragedy's many twists and turns by having original compositions play continuously throughout the production. Each shift in time, tone, and mood was accompanied by a change in music and was punctuated by Jennifer Archibald's gestural choreography, which offered evidence of the ways we might continue to embody grace even when faced with seemingly unyielding cruelty.

How to bring an end to such cruelty was one of the many questions that continued to reverberate as the lights came up at the end of the performance. Kahn's production of *The Oresteia* not only demonstrated just how urgent this question remains, but it also proved a fitting farewell for an artist who, through his rigorous engagements with classical work, has consistently bid audiences to reckon with the complexities and beauty of the human condition.

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“DADDY”: A MELODRAMA. By Jeremy O. Harris. Directed by Danya Taymor. The New Group and Vineyard Theatre at the Pershing Square Signature Center, Romulus Linney Courtyard Theatre, New York City. March 31, 2019.

Only in his third year of Yale's MFA Playwriting program, Jeremy O. Harris burst onto the 2018–19 American theatre season with not one but two Off-Broadway productions: *Slave Play* and *“Daddy.”* The former caused such an uproar that a few thousand people signed a change.org petition to shut down the New York Theatre Workshop production in which interracial couples engaged in sex therapy that involved role-playing antebellum slavery scenarios. The petition was not a success, and *Slave Play* went on to open on Broadway in October 2019. Anyone familiar with the gleeful terror and sensational transgressive spirit of this play will feel a kinship between it and *“Daddy.”* Under Danya Taymor's



Ronald Peet (Franklin) and Hari Nef (Alessia, an art gallery owner) in *“Daddy.”*
(Photo: Monique Carboni.)

direction and in a co-production from the New Group and Vineyard Theatre, *“Daddy”* careened in and out of dangerous territory as it mined the visual and psychic space between ideas of belonging and ownership.

The action of the play takes place in and around the production's most seductive visual feature: an infinity pool in back of a Bel Air mansion owned by a haughty, middle-aged white art collector named Andre (Alan Cumming). In Matt Saunders's scenic design, the pool stretched across the entirety of the front half of the stage in a near facsimile of David Hockney's *“Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)”* and it functioned as both a practical lap pool, a place for sex and baptisms, and even a womb-like site of symbolic rebirth. The object of Andre's obsession, Franklin (Ronald Peet), is a young, Black queer artist starting to be noticed by primarily white art collectors for creating these “weird dolls of black boys” with few discerning features other than the rags that clothe them. As their relationship develops into a grotesque reimagining of something like father and son replete with spankings and thumb sucking, Franklin's devoutly Southern Baptist mother, Zora (Charlayne Woodard), arrives to attend the first public exhibition of Franklin's dolls, which she affectionately refers to as his “coon babies.” Her presence marks the beginning of an explosive struggle with Andre for Franklin's soul and signals Harris's reworking of conventions of melodrama.

In melodrama, the stakes of conflict are enormous. Franklin is caught between antagonistic forces that come to be exaggerated as wholly good (the love of God and his mother) and mostly bad (Andre's possessive infantilizing), but Harris raises the stakes of this triadic conflict to such a degree that Zora and Andre become implausible stereotypes. In the battle for Andre's soul, one effectively neutralizes the other. The ensuing action finds Franklin wrestling