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June 29, 2018

A TRAGEDY AND A TRIUMPH

by Sarah Mathiesen



Emily Edwards and Byron Howells as Electra and Orestes in Theatre iNQ's 'First Born' IMAGE: Chrissy Maguire

I've been sworn to secrecy in this review.

Literally.

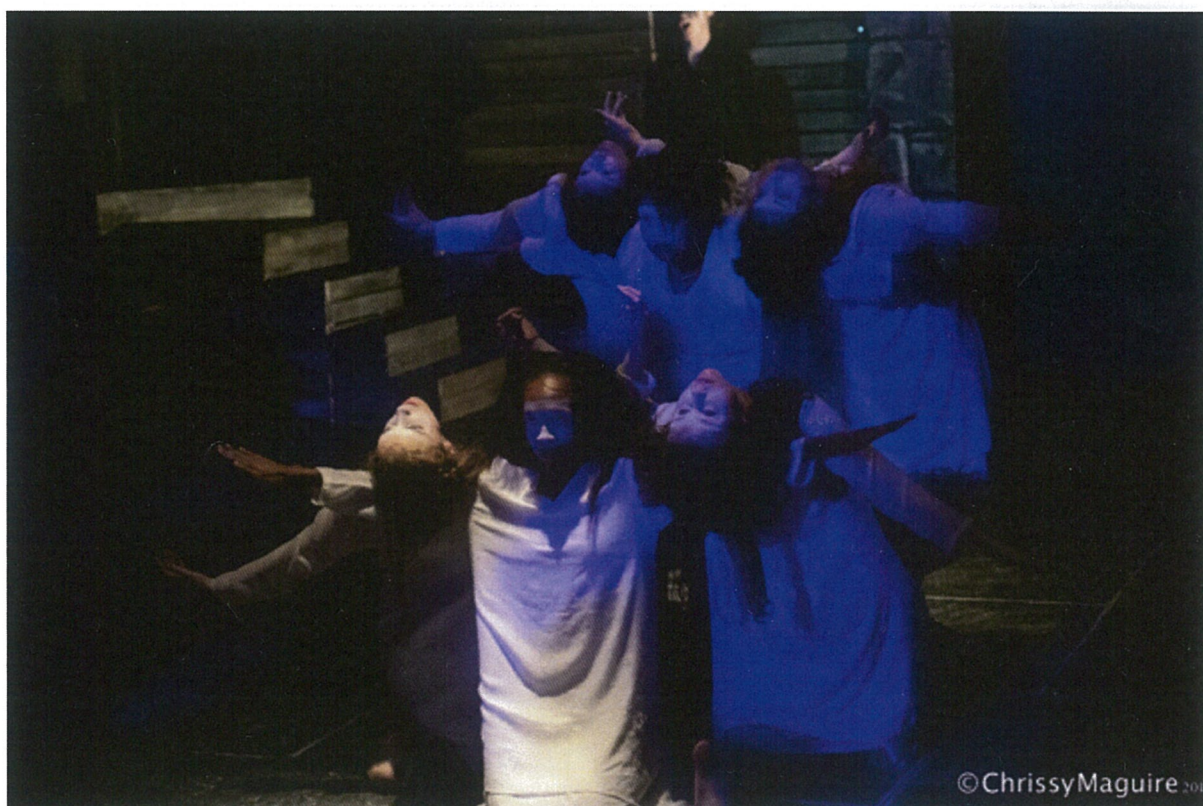
After seeing TheatreiNQ's *First Born* last night, I woke to an email this morning: "Lovely to see you last night. Forgot to ask you not to reveal the twist in the story. Trying to keep it a secret for as long as we can."

Fortunately, I hate spoilers, too. So all I'll say about the plot of *First Born* is that it opens on Electra, a young woman forced to live in grief and squalor after her father, the King of Argos, is murdered, her brother Orestes banished with a price on his head, and her adulterous mother remarries a new King who lives in fear of Orestes' return. Of course, Orestes *does* make his return, and Electra is convinced that it's a sign from the Gods to take action and claim justice. Stuff happens. Things are revealed. You may get goosebumps.

Pretty powerful.

What I love most about TheatreiNQ's productions – and what I think was even more apparent in this particular show – is that every technical aspect of theatre is utilised to tell the story. It's not just about the actors (although they were terrific), but the lighting, the sound, the set, the costuming, the movement, the transitions... They all play an equal role in developing and driving the drama.

For local theatre-nuts, Terri Brabon productions have long been synonymous with powerful soundscapes and *First Born* does not disappoint. There's ominous music woven into key points, but much of the tension is built through the incredible Greek Chorus twisting and writhing, hissing and humming, breathing and beating along to the plot. I'm rarely sold on the necessity of a Greek Chorus in modern productions – for me, it flies defiantly and lazily in the face of the old "*show 'em, don't tell 'em*" rule of writing – but this Chorus has been used to tremendous effect. Moving as one (and often two) units, these 11 actors were ethereal, almost organic beings: floating onto stage; masking scene transitions to the point I didn't notice what was happening until it had happened; and then disappearing into the background as though they were a natural part of the environment, both there and not there, as required. There were choreographed moments that had me nerding out in excitement at their faultless execution. And the lighting. Oh, the lighting!



'First Born's' Greek Chorus writhes and twists, both ethereal and organic. IMAGE: Chrissy Maguire

At the centre of this exquisite Chorus, shone our major players. Electra, played by NIDA Graduate Emily Edwards, was filled with rage and a ravenous desire for revenge. Emily wore this across her entire body and I found myself marveling at the visible tension that ran across her face, through her arms, hands, fingers and into her feet. It was as though her body could not contain Electra's anger and it would come spitting out with each line she delivered. Contrastingly, as Orestes, Byron Howells portrayed the passiveness of this character to a T.

Returning after 10 years, this teenage boy longs to be reunited with his family; he is innocent, impressionable and unaware of many of the events that lead to his exile. It was excruciating to watch Orestes become exceedingly weighed down with each revelation of his family's past until his eager obedience turned into something darker.

The conflict between Queen Clytemnestra (Terri Brabon) and King Agamemnon (Brendan O'Connor) was palpable. With Greek Theatre ultimately giving birth to the modern jury system, Greek writers were always careful to avoid presenting 'good guys' and 'bad guys', instead laying out everyone's good and bad attributes and leaving it to the audience to debate the story and decide. Terri has achieved the same here in *First Born*, with her efforts most evident in Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. Both motivated by a different love, they are passionate, fierce, compelling characters; and Terri and Brendan play them with strength and skill.



Brendan O'Connor as King Agamemnon in Theatre iNQ's 'First Born'. IMAGE: Chrissy Maguire

Paris Walsh brings an extraordinary range to her role as Slave Girl. First appearing as a meek and obliging servant, her distaste at the events that unfold, is shown through sensational physicality and mournful screams that chilled me to the bone. Robert Street is loathsome as King Aegisthus and I'm certain he'll feel battered and bruised after this run, Anne Vella-Sams is pitiful as the terrified Cassandra, and John Goodson is convincingly earnest as the kind Solinus.

I couldn't help feeling that there was a certain Shakespearean-feel to this production. Knowing ahead of time that Terri had written this adaptation in iambic pentameter, I was expecting that a little – but it was the twists and turns that reminded me most of old Will's work. In an earlier interview with Terri, we discussed how the Greek trilogy on which she'd based *First Born*, would have in fact served as inspiration for many of Shakespeare's plays, and it was fascinating to see how everything fits together.

If you are not an “old theatre” enthusiast, do not be put off by that.

HUXLEY's Creative Director Kieran joined me at *First Born* last night. Kieran was **not** a theatre enthusiast. He is now.

After the show he raved about the immersive experience he'd just had; noting the energy exchange that occurs between actors and audience that just doesn't exist in film. Kieran loved *First Born* from start to finish. So did I. And I'm sure all who see it will love it, too.