MIKE PEARSON | THE PERSIANS



Classics and the contemporary past



Mike Pearson and his new production of Aeschylus Persians (National Theatre of Wales) gets a superb review in the Guardian today [Link]

This is site-specific theatre with a vengeance. High up in the Brecon Beacons, in a mock-up village used by the military as a training-base, National Theatre Wales is recreating the oldest extant play in western drama: Aeschylus's The Persians. The combination of the story and the setting ,with the sun slowly disappearing over the hills, is overwhelming.
The Persians

The play itself is extraordinary. Produced in 472BC, only eight years after the Persians had been routed at Salamis, it is the only Greek tragedy to be drawn from recent history rather than from legend. Obviously Aeschylus was celebrating Athenian victory. But what is astonishing is his sympathy for the vanquished. Atossa, mother of the defeated Xerxes, views the wreckage of her country with mounting horror. The ghost of Darius, her husband, rises from the grave to announce that grief is man's lot and must be borne. Even "war-lusting" Xerxes himself, guilty of impetuously taking his country to war, is finally seen as an abject object of pity.

What is impressive about Mike Pearson's production, however, is the totality of the experience. We assemble

in a square in this deserted military village where the four-strong male chorus is rejoicing in war and announcing “no one can withstand this tsunami of the Persians in full rage.” We then march up a hill to sit in front of a four-storey house with the front cut away; and there we see, both in live action and on video, the tragedy enacted. There’s a wonderful moment when Atossa arrives in a white car to a blaze of trumpets. But, once she is in the house, a hand-held camera moves in close to watch the distintegration of her hopes as the news from Salamis arrives. And, with typical Pearson invention, that news is conveyed direct by video satellite.

Pearson puts the piece in contemporary clothes but makes no attempt to relate it directly to Iraq or Afghanistan. Instead he and the translator, Kaite O’Reilly, focus on how war destroys the very fabric of people’s identity. At the beginning, the chorus praise Xerxes as “fierce as a dragon scaled in gold”; by the end, they are threatening to beat him to death with a hammer. Even Darius, ritually raised from the dead, starts out in Paul Rhys’s performance as a gently melancholy ghost, only to turn into a wrathful figure

who talks of Xerxes as “a mortal playing God to gods”.

Sian Thomas, left, also puts in a tremendous performance as the queen, a woman of fiery splendour reduced to ululating agony as the disasters mount and she cries “this is the peak of my misery”. And the four strong chorus, in its turn, descends from arrogant state apparatchiks to figures writhing in torment.

This superb production, with atmospheric music by John Hardy, literally takes one on a journey. And, as one went back down the hill after, strange lamentations emerged from the deserted houses. Shivering slightly, one moved on, still hearing the aftermath of war in one’s ears.

Michael Billington



Charles Spencer in *The Telegraph* [Link]

This is extraordinary, one of the most imaginative, powerful and haunting theatrical events of the year … This rarely performed masterpiece, which taps so powerfully into our present concerns about the West’s adventures in Iraq and Afghanistan, would be an event however it was staged.

But the director of this National Theatre of Wales production, Mike Pearson, has achieved an extraordinary coup by staging it in the military village of Cilieni, from which civilians are usually barred. Built during the Cold War, and perched high in the Brecon Beacons, it has a church, houses, a village square. From a

distance it looks idyllic. But the breezeblock buildings have never been homes, and there are burnt out tanks in the deserted streets. This deeply creepy place is used to teach troops how to fight in built-up areas, which gives Cilieni its alternative, acronymic name of FIBUA.



Another Guardian review from Charlotte Higgins – [Link]

Kate Bassett in *The Independent* – [Link]

Video from the Guardian – music by John Hardy – [Link] –

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