

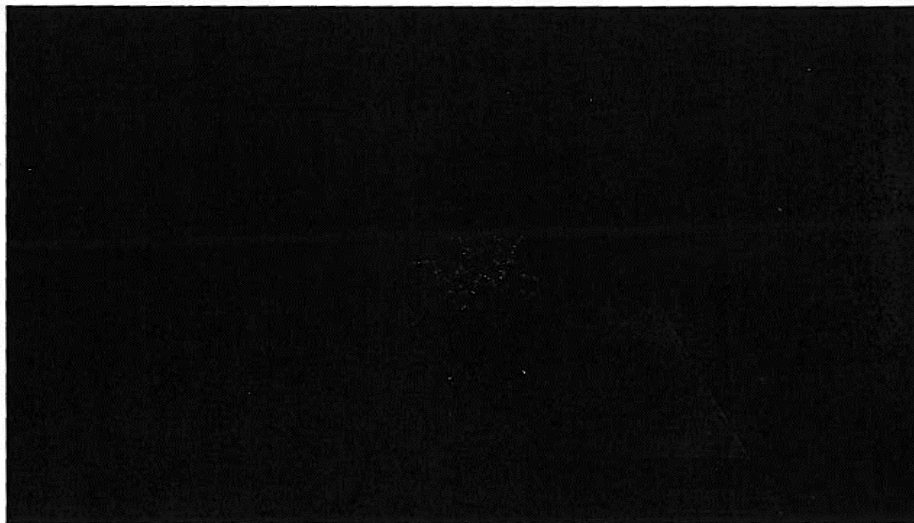
## Candidate 4 evidence

Tragedy: How Has it Evolved?

SCN-

Centre Number-

Word Count-3296



The genre of tragedy provides commentary in order to provoke discourse. The ancient Greeks were the orchestrators of this idea, and influential playwrights like Shakespeare followed suit. Only recently, with the works of Arthur Miller, have we begun to deviate from their heroes with fatal flaws, who commit fundamental transgressions, such as Oedipus Rex or Agamemnon. The characters in contemporary tragedy still have lethal flaws, but represent ordinary people. Joe Keller and Willy Loman make mistakes that impact on their immediate families but become lessons for us all because we can identify with their choices and their lives.

The messages the ancient Greeks communicated then are still relevant now. This hasn't always been the case. It is cliché that Greek tragedies are 'timeless', an eternal part of western culture. However for centuries these plays that provided social and political commentary through a grand heroes fall, went virtually unperformed across Britain. This is due to the first widely accessible translations only being done by Gilbert Murray in the early 20th century. Their foundation of western culture wasn't realized for most of the 20th Century. This is exemplified by Michael Billington's statement "It is the escalating horrors of the 20th century that explain the passionate renewal of interest in Greek drama"<sup>1</sup>. Since then Greek plays have been used to comment and criticize everything from contemporary world issues to past, unresolved mistakes. The skilled theatre director Ivo van Hove offers a poignant point about why we always turn back to the Greek tragedies "Every Greek Tragedy... is about something essential. It's amazing."<sup>2</sup>, meaning they all offer commentary that is timeless even if the plays themselves are relatively newly explored.

Tragedy has its roots in the theatre of the ancient city of Athens. The origins of theatre are normally traced back to Athenian festivals for Dionysus, the Greek God of wine. However there is some argument to say it also has roots in epic poetry, which was performed across the Greek city-states, either way the Athenian annual theatre competition, the City Dionysia, was born. Many famous Greek works were written, performed and won prizes in this festival. Most of these works have been lost to time. The most performed and well known plays are from Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, who innovated and changed how theatre was performed in their life times. Theatre is one of the oldest forms of storytelling and performing that appears in our modern world and it is largely unrecognisable from 2,000 years ago. Women being allowed to participate and more than three actors on stage mark the major changes to the aesthetic of Greek theatre. However, some changes are more minute. One being the attitude towards theatre, and specifically tragedy, which was that it offered a release in emotion (or Catharsis). It was a ceremony regarded as an integral part of Athenian culture. Billington's statement "What is striking is that everyone involved in the current Greek revivals sees

<sup>1</sup>Billington, Michael (2004) *Terror of modern times sets the stage for Greek tragedy*. The Guardian

<sup>2</sup>Rupert Goold, Ivo van Hove and Deborah Warner *Why Greeks Matter*, (2015) Alemlia Theatre, London

the plays as topical works rather than cultural artefacts"<sup>3</sup> helps explain why these ceremonious texts are still being revisited in the modern age.

Aeschylus' the *Oresteia* is regarded as the first and pivotal Greek tragic trilogy in existence and is one of the seven surviving plays out of ninety that he wrote. The original plays were written after the Persian wars and during a time when Athenian culture rapidly developed. Aeschylus spear headed everything we now call 'Classic Greek theatre.' He transformed theatre from one actor reading a work of epic poetry to two actors as well as a chorus speaking directly to an audience while having minimal character interaction. In the original *Oresteia* text the plays have an endless, bloody cycle of revenge. The first play follows the return of the King of Argos, Agamemnon, after 10 years of fighting in the Trojan war during which time he sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to the gods. Agamemnon's victorious celebration is cut short when his wife, Clytemnestra, mercilessly murders him and takes up rule alongside her lover. The cycle of blood continues in the second play as Clytemnestra and her lover are murdered by her son Orestes as revenge for Agamemnon's death. Orestes is at once set upon by the Furies, supernatural creatures who hunt and pursue murderers. In the third play, Orestes flees the Furies but is captured and brought before the goddess Athena's court. He is tried and found not guilty on the sexist notion that the murder of a wife is not equatable to the murder of a husband.

The original *Oresteia* has a prevailing sense of doom throughout the first two plays and a gradual return to the light in the last play. One of the key themes of the trilogy is the idea that the weight of history and heritage leads to bloodshed and destruction. The murder of Agamemnon is a consequence of his father boiling his brother's children and feeding them to him. Apollo's assistance of Orestes after he kills his father, the trial with Athena and Orestes' acquittal all relates to the rapid culture development in Athens at the sought to encourage people to embrace the newly created criminal courts by posing Orestes' trial as the first one. Apollo's inclusion in the play is generally regarded as a symbol of Athens being led out of the savagery of the Persian wars into the light of a civilised democracy. It is clear by this analysis that the performance of tragedy was intended to mirror relevant events and, while not critically, provided a commentary that any (male) Athenian citizen could relate to.

Zinnie Harris' *This Restless House* is an engaging adaptation of the *Oresteia*. While keeping all the cycles of blood it puts women at the centre of the drama. Clytemnestra kills her husband out of anger of his hubris and the betrayal she has felt at his hand. Orestes is no longer his mother's killer, his sister Electra is the one that strikes the final blow against her and her brother's deeply beloved mother. The pair of them are no longer out to kill their mother. Their reluctant hand is forced by their dead fathers'

<sup>3</sup>Billington, Michael (2004) *Terror of modern times sets the stage for Greek tragedy*

vengeful spirit. Orestes hangs himself when his sister commits the fatal act. Electra is committed to a mental institution where the battle of unburied demons blurs the lines between internal and external demons. The endless cycle of violence and trauma is brought to an end by Electra's triumph over the demons that haunt her.

In the performance of *This Restless House* at the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow, Harris achieves her aim of putting women at the centre of the first tragedy ever written and her message is clearly communicated in the production. Clytemnestra is portrayed by Pauline Knowles as a powerful woman, but rather than bloodthirsty and calculating, as Mark Fisher states in the *Guardian* "you have some sympathy for their restraint"<sup>4</sup> as, it is clear from Knowles' performance she is torn with grief and rage towards the man she loved for killing their daughter. Using knotted body language and an uneasy tone she creates a lost and confused mother whose already unstable world crashes down with the return of her daughter's killer and the man she still loves. This paints the character as a confused, albeit neglectful, mother who reaches a tipping point once her husband arrogantly brings home his concubine. Olivia Morgan's Electra is a compelling main character for the second play in Harris' adaptation, *The Bough Breaks*. She creates an equally uncertain and nervous personality to combat Knowles' now drunkardly insane Clytemnestra. Though she adds an extra layer that distances herself from Clytemnestra's uneasiness in the first act by effectively playing the conflict she feels within her when Orestes arrives. Bringing with him Agamemnon's curse and forcing both of them to consider seriously murdering their beloved mother. Morgan's Electra is assertive and independent as shown through her stern tone and upright body language.

Remaining true to its source material *This Restless House* also provides a social commentary, about the nature of morality and women as opposed to the Persian war and its outcomes. The first play, *Agamemnon's Return* highlights the role of women in ancient Greece. Clytemnestra's frustration that her husband is not going to be prosecuted for their child's murder develops into a fury at the act itself, which is ultimately the motive for Agamemnon's murder. Performing Clytemnestra in this complex way not only adds a modern spin, but creates debate in the audience as since Agamemnon wouldn't have been brought to justice by Argos, isn't she justified? If the simple fact of her gender kept her from getting legal justice for her dead child, isn't the only way to right this wrong to turn justice into revenge?

Whatever answers the audience arrive at are quickly undercut in *The Bough Breaks* as Clytemnestra's actions cause Agamemnon's ghost to haunt and torment Orestes and Electra until they carry out reluctant revenge on their mother. This suggests that Clytemnestra's actions were not justified as it

<sup>4</sup>Fisher, Mark (2016) *This Restless House Five Star Review Zinnie Harris's Electrifying Oresteia*

points out at the bleak fact that bloodshed leads to more bloodshed and this bloodshed turned her daughter into a killer. However Electra's innocence is questioned in the final play.

In the third play, *Electra and her shadow* it is never clear whether Electra's torment is her internal self hatred or a supernatural external force. It begs the question, was being her mother's killer her grim fate or was she given a choice? The debate over destiny verses choice is the core of the last play as Electra struggles to forgive herself and blames her actions on fate while wrapping up the psychologist Audrey in her demons that seem to blur the line of reality and hallucination. This eventually leads to Audrey having to confront her own demons that seem all too real. Harris' trilogy ends with both women confronting and resolving their conflicts which puts an end to any torment they suffer but leaves both with an understanding of fate and choice.

All of this compelling story telling is undercut by the evocative live music performed by the cast on stage. This choice from director Domonic Hill helps allude to a classical Greek feeling (as live music and choral songs were a integral part of Athenian theatre) while also not feeling out of place. The strong bass and guitar riffs that are underscored by delicate sounds of symbols add a haunting atmosphere that draws the audience into this warped modern world. Hill's inclusion of this is due to two reasons. The first is his subjective opinion that "when sound comes in recorded in a kind of filmic way. For me it really works when it's part of the world, part of the ensemble, part of the theatre"<sup>5</sup>. The second is that it adds to the naturalistic setting while giving an other-worldly and warped mood and atmosphere.

Tragedies in ancient Greece were effective in terms of the commentary and entertainment they provided, however the content of the plays were limited to heroes and places in Greece and Greek mythology. This meant that the plays created scenarios that the (male) audience could relate to but it also suffered from a lack of relatability. The plays are also notoriously challenging as Debora Warner says "I don't think these plays are found through the speaking of the words"<sup>6</sup>, this means that for a director and actor it is hard to interpret and difficult to approach.

David Lan offers a very insightful comment as he says "And, if we constantly go back to the Greeks, it is because of the immediacy of their engagement with the world."<sup>7</sup> This shows that even 2,000 years ago people were writing stories inspired from myths and tales that every one knew, to comment on the current events and worries facing the nation. It also explains why we return to them now. The poetic

<sup>5</sup>Dominic Hill, Zinnie Harris *This Restless House Discussion-Part 2*, Citizen's Theatre, Glasgow

<sup>6</sup>Rupert Goold, Ivo van Hove and Deborah Warner *Why Greeks Matter*, (2015) Alenia Theatre, London

<sup>7</sup>Lan, David as said in *Terror of modern times sets the stage for Greek tragedy*

language was informed and reinforced by Shakespeare and the trend of important and climactic events unfolding due to the hero's actions continued until the writings of Arthur Miller.

Arthur Miller's work is also highly regarded as an accomplishment in tragedy. Miller has a unique approach which is told from the perspective of the American nuclear family, as well as the influence of working class people on the elite. This contrasts to the Greek model which had the family at the top of society influencing those at the bottom. This is very evident as many of his famous works such as *All my Sons* and *Death of a Salesman* as the Loman and Keller families are key examples of the 'typical American family' and not anything special, apart from the Kellers being decently stable. This is a key choice which made Miller's work impactful in the 20th Century, and still resonates today.

*A View from the Bridge* is often described as Miller's most 'Greek' play. The two act play follows a working class family living near the Brooklyn Bridge in New York. The main character Eddie Carbone and his inappropriate infatuation with his wife's (Beatrice) orphaned niece culminates in his betraying Beatrice's illegal immigrant cousins, (Marco and Rodolpho) to the police, getting stabbed by his own knife and dying as a result. *A View from the Bridge* is a bloody and dramatic story of a man's lust and pride which destroys himself and his family. This story is similar to the Greek plot of a hero's fall from grace. Other Greek elements thread through in the play such as the chorus and narrator who are facilitated by Eddie's lawyer friend Alfieri. The plot examines masculinity and what it means to be a man. This is done through the character of Eddie and his possessive obsession of his niece and his rage at an effeminate man 'stealing' what he views as his prize. The Young Vic production in 2015 adds to this play's reputation as a modern Greek tragedy while also changing elements of the aesthetic of traditional tragedy to bring this compelling look at masculinity into the modern world.

In Ivo van Hove's production of *A view from the Bridge* the set and costumes are stripped back and bare. The only colour of the stage is the shoeless actors, the blood of Eddie, and on one occasion a chair. The audience surrounding three sides of the thrust stage can almost touch Mark Strong (Eddie) as he and Luke Norris (Rodolpho) box in a stage that is lit from above by what seems the heavens themselves, watching as this tragedy plays out over two gruelling hours. The minimalist style that van Hove presents is very successful in letting the words of the play and the complex and morally grey tone speak for itself. It also lets the actors paint the stage with their nuanced and well thought out movement and intense and compelling voices. The final moment of the play is when it all turns from a stellar production to an unforgettable piece of art that elevates Miller's 20th Century story into the modern world. Throughout the play it is felt, as an audience member, that we are spectators looking into a cage with invisible, but tangible, bars that allow us to experience the heat of the play without burning ourselves. The last moment cements the fire that we were protected from as the entire cast

freezes on stage and the blood of Eddie drops from the ceiling and transforms this theatre piece into a painting that will leave an impression on all those who are a witness to its horrific conclusion.

This production at the Young Vic adds something to the play that has never been done before as, in van Hove's words he "I took his [Miller's] concept of a Greek tragedy from the original one act play and I brought it together with the much more refined, emotionally and psychologically, two act play"<sup>8</sup>. This combination of an epic Greek story and well developed characters means that there is a lot more room for the director and actors to be more playful with the staging and portrayal of the characters.

The effective use of minimal staging brings the core of Miller's Greek tragedy to life by making the themes tangible and visceral for the audience. The performances of the cast, most notably, Mark Strong are key in bringing this tragic core to life. Strong is able to play Eddie as a complex and sympathetic character, even through the harshly masculine dialogue. Strong makes it very engaging to watch this horrible and troubled man falling further and further down a rabbit hole of his own making. Strong does this by portraying a man who's fatal flaw is his almost childlike ignorance of his ingrained perception of masculinity. Strong also doesn't make Eddie too overbearing at the start of the play as Miller's original script implies; Eddie has a raised and intense volume, that could get overbearing and has the danger of leaving no room for Strong to push Eddie once the final act commences. Strong is helped immensely by the stripped back staging and the bare and unforgiving lighting by Jan Versweyveld, all of which allows Strong to paint the uncomfortable lust and pride of Eddie Carbone for all to see without alienating the audience. This bare nature of the staging creates an atmosphere best described by Andrew Dickson who states, "It goes scene by scene. It's like witnessing a car accident that you see a hundred metres before it happens."<sup>9</sup>

Strong's performance and that of the rest of the cast (notably Phoebe Fox as Catherine) helps bring this 20th Century tragedy into the modern world and twist it in such a way that it really adds to the central idea of Arthur Miller's classic play. Normal everyday families being torn apart by their own subconscious desires and actions. After two hours of watching this sickeningly compelling man chart his own downfall, any audience member can't help but ask themselves if they have an Eddie in them and if so, what would it take for it to be drawn out? The fear is exemplified in Strong's effective creation of a 'deer caught in headlights' for Eddie as his naivete at his own flaws touches this uncomfortable fact. Strong's performance is extremely captivating in his portrayal of the truth of Eddie. The truth of, as

<sup>8</sup>Rupert Gould, Ivo van Hove and Deborah Warner *Why Greeks Matter*, (2015) Alemlia Theatre, London

<sup>9</sup>Dickson, Andrew (2014) *'My aim is the ultimate production': Ivo van Hove on directing Arthur Miller*

Alexis Soloski points out “a man who has become a stranger to himself, a paragon of manhood unmanned and set adrift both by his own desires and by challenges to his masculine assumptions.”<sup>10</sup>

Arthur Miller’s most Greek play was effectively used by Ivo van Hove to comment on modern masculinity. The stripped back nature of the play helps emphasise its relevancy by giving the audience an incentive to colour in the character of Eddie into themselves or someone from their lives. The audience’s engagement and enjoyment of the play is assured in “the violence that propels the play is inexorable. We are all of us caught, rapt and culpable, in its spray.”<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, catharsis in ancient Greece meant the liberation of intense emotions. Today, as modern viewers, our cathartic experience is derived from us looking within to question our own behaviour. Both past and present plays carry the banner of tragedy as the classically styled *This Restless House* and the more contemporary *A View from the Bridge* offer insight into our current world. “Why do people go into a dark room, switch off the lights, watch a group of people pretending to be other people? Why is that? Why are we still doing that a couple of thousand years after the Greeks decided it was a good idea?”<sup>12</sup> While the aesthetic of tragedy may have changed, its function of commenting and evaluating society hasn’t. Tragedy has evolved and continues to be the necessary mirror for every society.

<sup>10</sup>Soloski, Alexis (2015) *A View from the Bridge* review-Miller reinvented with visceral power

<sup>11</sup>Soloski, Alexis (2015) *A View from the Bridge* review-Miller reinvented with visceral power

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“Every Greek Tragedy... is about something essential. It’s amazing.”-(15:24)

“took his [Miller’s] concept of a Greek tragedy from the one act play and I brought it together with the much more refined, emotionally and psychologically, two act play”-(16:53)

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“when sound comes in recorded in a kind of filmic way. For me it really works when it’s part of the world, part of the ensemble, part of the theatre”-(5:36)

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“Why do people go into a dark room, switch off the lights, watch a group of people pretending to be other people? Why is that? Why are we still doing that a couple of thousand years after the Greeks decided it was a good idea?”-(9:20)

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“It is the escalating horrors of the 20th century that explain the passionate renewal of interest in Greek drama”

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“a man who has become a stranger to himself, a paragon of manhood unmanned and set adrift both by his own desires and by challenges to his masculine assumptions.”

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