

# Cultural Daily

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## Nightmares within Nightmares—Playwright Ellen McLaughlin adapts *The Oresteia*

Charity Hume · Wednesday, May 22nd, 2019

*The Oresteia*, adapted by Ellen McLaughlin, begins with Clytemnestra's nightmare, a dream of washing the walls of her house until she realizes the pail she is using is filled with blood. This scene introduces the internally discovered landscape of McLaughlin's imaginative adaptation of the original Aeschylus trilogy. In her modern version of this ancient work, Ellen McLaughlin finds psychological avenues for us to experience the horror in the dark family drama of the house of Atreus. McLaughlin's focus on the interior motivations of her characters gives them a modern dimension that encourages us to examine the bewildering divisions within our own families, and the meaning of the violence of our own contemporary Trojan Wars.

Michael Kahn, the artistic director of the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington D.C., commissioned McLaughlin's adaptation of *The Oresteia*, as the culminating project of his directing career, requesting that she distill the original trilogy into a version that could be performed in a single evening. The play explores deep questions of moral accountability, both for the perpetrators, and for us as witnesses, as it relentlessly unfolds the sequence of murders that each member of the house of Atreus feels they owe the gods: Agamemnon commits infanticide by killing his daughter, Iphigenia; Clytemnestra and her lover commit regicide when they kill him for this crime; and finally, Orestes commits matricide when he avenges his father's death.

The interior motivations in McLaughlin's version of *The Oresteia* speak powerfully to our age. Clytemnestra's recollection of her nightmare in the opening scene begins her journey further back into the realm of memory. In a flashback, Iphigenia is still alive, and when she wakes in a fright, Clytemnestra is there to comfort her. From the play's earliest scene, Iphigenia and Clytemnestra are given a beautiful and tragic bonding, imbued with a violent foreboding that underlies and motivates the rest of the play. The child relates a prophetic nightmare, when she sees two eagles devour a pregnant hare in the sky. In this dark omen of the slaughtered child, we are in a nightmare within a nightmare.



Simone Warren as Iphigenia and Kelley Curran as Clytemnestra in *The Oresteia*. Photo by Scott Suchman

To create this powerful moment, McLaughlin borrows texts from earlier versions of the story, outside the original trilogy. The insertion of this scene gives the audience a way to understand the cold logic of a mother's vengeance for her murdered child. In this ingenious way, McLaughlin

neers the backstory of the Aeschylus plays inside a profoundly archetypal place in our minds. Scenes are called up out of the recesses of memory, from internal places, showing dark motives. It is impossible not to sympathize with a mother's, primordial urges to punish her child's murderer at any cost to herself. Clytemnestra's deep attachment to her daughter allows us to find the motive for the murder of Agamemnon, who sacrificed her to the gods.

In a recent interview with McLaughlin, I asked about whether there was any equivalent in the modern world of Agamemnon's blood sacrifice of his daughter, in order for the gods to give his ships wind on the way to war. McLaughlin's response drew a direct connection to the various international conflicts that consume the lives of generations of young people, in historic cycles of repetition:

*I think we have always sacrificed our children in different ways. It's what human societies tend to do, much to our shame. We sacrifice boys differently than we sacrifice girls, but we are very quick to sacrifice our children, one way or the other. I think Iphigenia is asked to sacrifice herself in the classical story, and there have been Iphigenias ever since. The girl is asked to sacrifice herself for the greater good, and for her father's cause. She is asked to give up her life for his idea.*

In this stark reality, I see more clearly the harsh cost of those who appease the gods of war in my own era, and feel the threat of the particular suffering that war inflicts on women. The cleansing ritual of Clytemnestra's bucket of blood can be read in the mythological language of many other kinds of sacrifice, the goat on the stone, the bull of white skin, the child of Abraham, Abel's lamb. But it is only after hearing McLaughlin's parallel that I see the concept of our own daily toll of conflicts, the victims, as types of blood sacrifice to the gods of war. In this play, there is no hiding from the repetition and facts of the consequence of violence, and its ongoing legacy.

McLaughlin asks:

*Once we have seen ourselves through a criminal like Orestes, once we have seen that happen in front of us, what is our responsibility? What do we owe him? What do we owe ourselves? What do we do?*

*And when we do things right, how do we do things right? The thing that kept on coming up was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, without which we would not have anything like a functioning country in South Africa. It would be just be embroiled in civil war. The fundamental principles of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission are that they do not promise absolution; they do not promise forgiveness. Nothing like that. What they promise is that all the truths that are present can be spoken, and will be spoken. The truth of the people who were persecuted. The truths of the people to whom violence was done, and the truth of people who do that violence, and everyone in between. All of those truths will be spoken because everybody will be there to listen. They can promise only that they will allow them to speak, and that they will listen.*

*And it turns out that those are the truths that underlie theater.*

As McLaughlin describes the moral accounting inside Aeschylus, and inside the imaginative and personal journey in this version of the play, we gain understanding of the dramatic ways our internal drama rules our actions, when we become prisoners of our own desire. Somehow, in the facts of staring down our own human violence, in its most intimate quarters, an experience of listening to what happened becomes in itself, a redemptive act, one that the theater offers. Not forgiveness. Not absolution. But a place to speak, to hear, to listen.

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Ellen McLaughlin is an award-winning playwright and actor. Her plays include *Tongue of a Bird* (The Public Theater, The Mark Taper Forum, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Almeida Theater, London), *A Narrow Bed*, (New York Theater Workshop, Actors' Theater of Louisville), *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* (Classic Stage Co., NYC) *Trojan Women* (The Flea, NYC), *Infinity's House* (Actors' Theater of Louisville), *Helen*, (The Public Theater) *The Persians*, (National Actors' Theater, NYC, Shakespeare Theater, DC), *Oedipus* (The Guthrie), *Ajax in Iraq* (ART Institute, MA, Flux Theater, NY), *Septimus and Clarissa* (Ripe Time, NY) *Pericles* (Orlando Shakespeare Festival), and *Penelope* (Playmaker's Rep, N.C.) Her work has been performed in New York, Off-Broadway and regionally as well as overseas. Among her honors are the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Lila Wallace—Reader's Digest Writer's Award and the Helen Merrill Award for Playwriting. As an actor, she is most well known for having originated the part of the Angel in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, appearing in all workshops and productions of the play through its original run on Broadway, '93-94.

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