

The Direction of *The Oresteia* by Ellen McLaughlin

Amanda E. Rountree

A thesis  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington  
2023

Committee:  
Valerie Curtis-Newton  
An-lin Dauber  
Kelly Kitchens  
Jeffrey Fracé

Program Authorized to Offer Degree

School of Drama

© Copyright 2023

Amanda E. Rountree

University of Washington

Abstract

The Direction of *The Oresteia* by Ellen McLaughlin

Amanda E. Rountree

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:  
Valerie Curtis-Newton  
School of Drama

This thesis documents a portion of the capstone assignment for the Professional Director Training Program. It specifically includes text analysis and concept information that led to the direction of a full length production of Ellen McLaughlin's *The Oresteia* for the School of Drama's mainstage season. The production was produced and ran February 23-March 5, 2023 at the Floyd and Dolores Jones Playhouse on the campus of the University of Washington.

For my parents who have supported me through everything.  
I am beyond grateful and I love you  
more than words can say.

# **Table of Contents**

Section 1- Play Analysis & Concept

Section 2- Design & Design Process

Section 3- Rehearsal Process

Section 4- Post Production Reflections

Section 5- Production Photos

Section 6- Research

# **Creative Team**

Director- Amanda E. Rountree

Set Designer- Brandon David Riel

Costume Designer- Ricky German

Lighting Designer- Andrew D. Smith

Sound Designer- Alex Parr and Taylor Freeman

Stage Manager- Nina Williams-Teramachi

Assistant Stage Manager- Lily Nguyen

Properties Master- Andrea Bush

Dramaturg- Catherine Heiner

Costume Concept Designer- Jenni Gile

# **Cast**

Clytemnestra- Emily Stone

Agamemnon- Jarron Williams

Orestes- Nic Morden

Electra- Esther Okech

Cassandra- Iveliz Martel

Iphigenia- Karis Ho

Chorus A- Jesimiel Jenkins

Chorus B- Natalie Tassielli

Chorus C- Chinelo Okpala

Chorus D- Deja Culver

Chorus F- Michelle Conklin

Chorus G- Paula Wilson Nitka

Chorus H- Zack Chaykin

Chorus I- Ryan Hawkins

Understudy Performer- Emma Archbold

Understudy Performer- Nathaniel Maszak

Understudy Performer- Taylor Freeman

# **Section 1**

## **Play Analysis & Concept**

*“One need not be a chamber to be haunted, one need not be a house; The brain has corridors—surpassing material place. Far safer, of a midnight meeting external ghost, than its interior confronting that cooler host.”—Emily Dickinson*

*“Civil War fattening on men’s ruin shall not thunder in our city. Let not the dry dust that drinks the black blood of citizens through passion for revenge and bloodshed for bloodshed, be given our state to prey upon. Let them render grace for grace. Let love be their common will; let them hate with single heart. Much wrong in the world thereby is healed.” – The Furies<sup>1</sup>*

I read Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* for the first time as an undergraduate student in a seminar course on the development of Western civic thought. There was very little focus on the text’s compelling characters or discussion of how drama was a vehicle for the cultivation of empathy amongst ancient Athenian citizenry. This seminar asked us instead to focus solely on the play’s lasting impact on philosophical discourse and its relationship to the development of our current judicial system. The play had become an artifact, a relic of its time and place, relevant only to us as an intellectual exercise or an abstracted exploration of ancient justice and ethics. So reading Ellen McLaughlin’s contemporary adaptation was a revelation for me—it felt vital and urgent rather than soporific. Despite all the grief and bloodshed at the core of the story, McLaughlin’s *The Oresteia* offers the possibility of hope by affirming that communal care and responsibility are the way beyond perpetual cycles of vengeance and destruction.

McLaughlin has openly discussed the extensive research she did on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) for her adaptation. Though the TRC did not prosecute the crimes committed during South Africa’s apartheid regime, the commission was responsible for uncovering the truth about the human rights violations perpetrated and the subsequent drafting of a reparations policy for the nation. The TRC’s mission was to find a way for the people of South Africa to tell the truth about the sins of their past, to acknowledge how those harmful actions impact the present, and to find a way to move forward together into the future. Though imperfect in its processes and outcomes, the TRC is an example of the kind of justice McLaughlin evinces in *The Oresteia*—justice that seeks to break the cycles of retribution, to maintain accountability, and, most importantly, to heal. During Orestes’ trial one of the Chorus members pointedly asks: “Aren’t we better than our worst crimes? Are we just going to

---

<sup>1</sup> Aeschylus. *Oresteia*. Translated by Richmond Lattimore, The University of Chicago Press, 1953.

go on trading blood endlessly back and forth? What is the sense of that? Aren't we tired?"<sup>2</sup> Though we should never tire of seeking justice, we should tire of any system that values and encourages retribution and punishment over understanding, and hopefully, mercy. After the recent political upheaval at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, McLaughlin reaffirmed the resonances of her adaptation for this fraught moment in American history: "How do we believe in governance when we've seen it desecrated? How do we believe in the fundamental good of the human spirit when we've seen it at its worst? What do we do in the aftermath of mayhem that has been of our own creation?"<sup>3</sup> These questions of how we dispense justice as members of modern society are perpetually salient. When Aeschylus wrote the *Oresteia*, Athens was wrestling with the same questions—the play having been written after a time of recent political upheaval (Athens' Democratic Revolution). In his article *Justice and the Oresteia*, J. Peter Euben states that by "putting contemporary political debate into the costume of a legendary but living past, Aeschylus provides the audience with a magnified reflection of their own lives. With eyes on the action before them, and thoughts on the decisions that confront them, they have an opportunity to turn sight into foresight and insight."<sup>4</sup> Though the past depicted in the play may no longer be 'living' for us today, the questions it poses about justice and grace are still just as vital. The play asks: in the name of justice, what do we owe to each other? And it answers: a duty to speak the truth, to create accountability, to acknowledge the humanity of others, and to exercise grace.

I don't think I fully anticipated how personal this piece would be for me when I selected it for my thesis production. As a capstone project, *The Oresteia* embodies exactly the kind of stories that are at the core of my interests and ambitions as an artist and director. I am deeply interested in stories that grapple with our relationship to memory, community, and spirituality. *The Oresteia*'s characters constantly seek to understand their relationship to the past and how that influences their present actions. McLaughlin makes it clear that no choice is made in a vacuum devoid of our relationships to one another, to our collective histories, or even to our

---

<sup>2</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 77.

<sup>3</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. "The Oresteia: a Benefit Reading." *Ellenmclaughlin.com*, January 11, 2021. <https://www.ellenmclaughlin.com/news/the-oresteia-a-benefit-reading>

<sup>4</sup> Euben, J. Peter, "Justice and the Oresteia" in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 76 No. 1, 1982, pp. 24.

conception of the divine. It is clear from McLaughlin's historic points of reference, including South African apartheid and the U.S. Capitol Riot, that this adaptation clearly addresses both personal and cultural intergenerational trauma. The play confronts the ways in which we can transfer pain and grief to the next generation either through our own violent actions or the violence done to us. I would also argue that this includes religious trauma and the ways in which religious extremism affects whole communities; the ways in which religion is used as the justification for the enactment of violence; and the ways in which one's loss of connection to the divine can create feelings of loss or betrayal. Orestes embodies all of this—his sense of purpose from Apollo; the impact of his actions upon his family and nation; and his feelings of deep despair and abandonment after fulfilling his supposed destiny. The Chorus' response to Orestes is ultimately the key to unlocking *The Oresteia*—if we can empathize with him, identify with him, or simply understand him while also acknowledging the wrongs he has done, both McLaughlin and Aeschylus would say that this is the first step on a new road of reconciliatory justice. The past cannot ever truly be buried or forgotten—only accepted and learned from. This is never an easy journey—it is filled with imperfection, complicated emotions, and struggle. Grace and mercy are incredibly difficult especially in a society that often values punishment and encourages us to hold onto grievances. For me, this play is a provocative invitation to wrestle with how as individuals and as a society we can pursue consequences for injustice while also recognizing the full humanity of even those who have done violence to their neighbors.

## **THE PRODUCTION**

Like the world of many Greek tragedies, the world of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is one in which the human and the divine intersect. While perhaps not actively present, the influence of the gods can certainly be felt across the action of the play. The Dionysia, the festival for which Aeschylus originally wrote the play, was as much a theatre festival as it was a religious one, meant to honor the gods through the various performances. Thus in the *Oresteia* and in many of Aeschylus' other works, the presence of the gods is keenly felt, and they play a key role in how justice is apportioned. However, it is important to interrogate whether the gods in the world of McLaughlin's adaptation truly care about the actions of mortals. Here it seems that if the gods do exist, they are largely indifferent to human suffering except when, in their capriciousness, they

choose otherwise. The god Apollo demands retribution for Agamemnon's murder, but does not concern himself with justice for the murder that Agamemnon himself committed. The gods are present as instigators, particularly of divine vengeance, but they do not remain to clean up their messes. Once Orestes has fulfilled his holy mission, Apollo vanishes, leaving Orestes without proof for the Chorus that he was indeed commanded by the god. By removing Apollo and Athena from the story's concluding supernatural courtroom drama, McLaughlin narrows the world of the play and makes it more immediately relatable and human. The story transforms from one about justice as a gift from the gods, to one in which mankind cannot rely on divine intervention but must do their best, however imperfect it may be, to repair and to heal.

The main action of McLaughlin's play is contained to the courtyard just outside the royal house of Atreus in the kingdom of Mycenae. The audience only gets glimpses of the wider world beyond from the verbal accounts of other characters since much of the audience's perspective is limited to the family and their immediate orbit. I find it fascinating that for a play so concerned with the house and its inner workings, that it is not set within the house itself, but outside of it. Though this may have been done to better suit many of the traditional conventions of Greek tragedies, it also creates the sense that the house cannot fully contain the calamity within its walls. The secrets and sins cannot be stored out of sight, but must come spilling out in the open air. The blood at the foundation of this house visibly seeps up through the earth and onto the walls, soaking them in a dried blood hue. However, the question becomes, who is willing to face this reality? Or does the whole world continue on as though nothing has happened, willfully blind to the ways in which the past will continue to impact the present unless it is faced and dealt with? As I've continued to dive into the world of the play, I have realized that the spine at its heart is the conundrum of how "to cleanse the house." Each of the play's characters try to accomplish this work in their own way—some thinking that more murder will wash away the past, some choosing to ignore the growing blight by focusing on cleaning the physical space in the same way they always have, despite how little that may actually accomplish.

A prompt often offered to directors and designers is to consider how circumstances and environments transform from the beginning of a play to the end. Throughout much of *The Oresteia*, the characters are working to clean the house either through their work on the physical

space, or through the enactment of deeds of bloody vengeance which they believe will lift the generational curse. I wanted to explore the effects of time and guilt on the space itself—it is a world where the unnatural blight caused by the sins of the family is deep and cannot be remedied with a bit of Windex or a fresh coat of paint. Before the events of the play, the murders committed by Tantalus and Atreus, forebears of the House of Atreus, have already rotted the foundations of the house and Iphigenia's murder by her father only compounds its desecration. While Clytemnestra has endeavored to hold Mycenae together while her husband is off at war, Aeschylus' original text mentions how the land has wallowed in Agamemnon's absence, presumably due to Clytemnestra's attention to revenge over proper governance. Since the play begins in a place of fracturing, I am interested to see how we can continue pushing this concept even further in Act II with everything declining into a worse state, and the Chorus' work on the house having diminishing returns. We should see that rather than purifying the house, Clytemnestra's act of vengeance has only worsened the problems already present. With an intermission between Acts I and II, we're intent to accentuate the impact of Clytemnestra's crime over the ten-year interval between those acts, particularly with the makeshift grave of Agamemnon at its center. With no intermission between Acts II and III, I want to use the transition between these acts to explore the more immediate effects of Orestes' crime. The perpetual cycle continues—blood on blood, crime on crime. However, I do not think we are in the same place at the end of the play as we are in the beginning. The first two acts end in a sense of triumphalism and orgasmic furor, where all are told to rejoice because the house is finally clean. Each time though, the underlying issue has not truly been solved. I am convinced that what has transformed at the conclusion of the play is the understanding that true cleansing begins with washing the blood from the *people* rather than through tidying the space. It is only when the Chorus start washing the blood from Orestes and Electra, that the restoration of the house can truly begin.

Over the last few years I've realized that my tendency as both a visual artist and as a director has been to gravitate to realism and very subtle, controlled compositions. Part of this may be due in some part to my propensity to overanalyze and maintain critical distance from my own work. With *The Oresteia*, I have been excited to have another opportunity to push myself stylistically beyond the bounds of strict realism, and to lean more into my sentiments and

intuitions rather than relying solely on my intellect to resolve the play's questions. *The Oresteia* is a play of blood, fierce emotions, and highly symbolic action—it contains both quiet moments of human connection, and richly poetic gestures. While working on Erik Ehn's *The Saint Plays* during the 2021-22 academic year, I made it one of my goals to embrace the language and tropes of surrealism, dreamscapes, and expressionism in my work. Through perhaps not as pointedly enigmatic and metaphoric as Ehn, McLaughlin still deftly employs many moments of symbolism and heightened theatricality in this adaptation that lend themselves to a flair for the dramatic—the red streamer cascading down from the house after Iphigenia's murder; the mystical appearances of the ghosts; the funereal ritual enacted by Orestes and Electra summoning their dead father; and the Chorus 'transforming' into the Furies and dousing Orestes in buckets of blood. During this process I am so excited to explore how each of these moments can embrace a sense of mystery and symbolism while maintaining clear action and intention.

I've also grown increasingly interested in the power of horror as a genre of storytelling and I am interested to investigate how this might impact the quality of the ghost apparitions and the overall sound design of this production. While horror is not often theatrically produced, even though it remains a constant staple of cinema, theatre is particularly good at telling ghost stories. Despite not being strictly classified as horror, McLaughlin's *The Oresteia* is still a deeply haunted story—full of ghosts both literal and metaphoric. As Emily Dickinson writes, “one need not be a chamber to be haunted,” and indeed each of *The Oresteia*'s characters, including the literal house of Atreus itself, are haunted by the specters of the past that manifest in moments of heightened theatricality. However, the best ghost stories understand that the ghosts themselves are not really what is frightening—it is our capacity for monstrousness which we allow to fester and grow beneath the floorboards of our hearts. In his Gothic horror film *Crimson Peak*, Guillermo del Toro penned the line “a ghost is just a metaphor [...] for the past.”<sup>5</sup> In *The Oresteia*, McLaughlin continually underscores how the ancestral curse of the House of Atreus continues to linger, haunting all who enter it. Here, the past doesn't die—it continues to impact the characters in the present and plague both their dreams and waking moments. Occasionally, characters perceive these apparitions and other times they exist only as silent specters that influence the action obliquely. While not necessarily 'surreal,' the appearances of the ghosts in

---

<sup>5</sup> Del Toro, Guillermo, director. *Crimson Peak*. Universal Pictures, 2015.

the play do signal a different theatrical language, one that is visceral and expressive, and one that I am excited to explore.

Though the royal family drives the events of the play forward, the ubiquity of the Chorus throughout the text and their arc is vital to McLaughlin's *The Oresteia*. In Aeschylus' original trilogy, each play has a distinct choral group—in *Agamemnon* they are the old men left behind when the soldiers sailed to Troy; in *The Libation Bearers* they are the foreign serving women of the royal house; and in *The Eumenides* they are the vengeful Furies. To provide a sense of continuity to the story, McLaughlin created a single unified Chorus that spans the entire narrative, serving all three functions found within the original plays—those left behind; those assigned to tend and order the house; and those who stand in judgment. The Chorus begin simply as the household staff, passively observing the decline of the house and the murderous events therein. McLaughlin describes them as “always about, engaged in various obscure minor tasks, doing the work of keeping the place going in some mysterious way [...] they are unremarkable [...] what they are up to seems so commonplace by comparison to the grand business of the rest of the play. But this is their power.”<sup>6</sup> I want to ensure that this sense of power is both fully understood and keenly felt by the audience—the Chorus' prevalence and ordinariness is precisely what empowers them to become Orestes' judges by the play's end. They have witnessed the crimes committed and ultimately are the only ones left to pick up the pieces of the beleaguered household and bring order and justice to the kingdom. McLaughlin initially endows her Chorus with a similar function as their ancient counterparts—they are there to serve as cyphers for the audience, filling in the back story and responding to the grand drama around them. However as the play progresses, McLaughlin individualizes the Chorus members more and more, giving them distinct voices and perspectives from which they argue Orestes' guilt and punishment. As we work to develop the Chorus throughout this process, I am interested in crafting an arc of unified action and intention to individualism, through varying degrees of rhythm, stylized movement, and composition.

Even when I read it in college, *The Eumenides*, the final work in Aeschylus' trilogy, has always struck me as a bit of a problem play—it transforms what was a much more action-packed

---

<sup>6</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 2.

narrative into essentially a divine courtroom drama. In this adaptation, McLaughlin deftly swaps the deific intervention for a deeply human conflict where the ending is not so neatly resolved. As mentioned before, the Chorus become Orestes judges, actively taking control of the story after their previous relative inaction in the play's central drama. Despite this thematic shift, the third act of McLaughlin's adaptation, as with Aeschylus' original, is still relatively text heavy. With this in mind, I want to keep the physical action clear and dynamic to ensure that these moments of heated debate and oral conflict are engaging and truly land with the audience. Act III is perhaps not the most physically alive section of the play, but it should be the portion that activates audiences most. Since their arc involves a tension between action and inaction, I want to ensure that the Chorus' onstage business throughout the show has purpose (they have been tasked with tending and repairing the house), while also demonstrating how their superficial activities do not affect real change. Their power is ultimately not in acts of physical labor, but in their ability to accept decisive responsibility and break the cycles of retribution. Their journey over the course of the play is vital in helping us understand their transformation from mere observers to active judges. However, this arc is also complicated by their appearance as the Furies at the end of Act II. In this moment the text indicates that "we see them as [Orestes] sees them and they are the Furies now,"<sup>7</sup> ostensibly shifting the narrative perspective to Orestes' interior perception. Since this shift in viewpoint does not occur many other times throughout the play, I am interested to explore how it might either visually mirror the play's ghostly apparitions (very similar to the appearance of Banquo in *Macbeth*), or parallel the subjective unreality of the fabric blood streaming from the house after Iphigenia's murder.

The ultimate goal of this production is to land the spine, "to cleanse the house," with our audience, and to hopefully connect with theatregoers on the timely resonances of the show's themes. *The Oresteia* is a morally complex story that asks its audiences to empathize with each of these character's journey to meaningfully seek justice. It's a play that should discomfit all of us, challenging our safe notions of retribution and justice, and ultimately moving our communities toward compassion and healing. However, like making theatre, communal healing is a messy process because it involves the necessity for compromise and collaboration despite enmity or disagreement. McLaughlin, in an essay about her adaptation wrote, "it's an ancient

---

<sup>7</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 65.

concept, a Greek one in fact, that notion that in recognizing each other in all our confusion, pain, and jagged moments of violence and cruelty, bravery and kindness, we draw ourselves back to the circle of what we share, what gives us a stake in each other, our happiness and our enlightenment. It's born of the belief that only by bringing us all into the same place and hearing the truth if we can speak it, can we heal. *Which is of course the basic principle at work in theater.* I thought, if I can find a way to bring that essential grace to the third act of my play, I might be able to write my way to something like hope in these dark times. So that's what I have tried to do.”<sup>8</sup> To me, this play does indeed feels something like hope, and my deep aspiration is that when audiences leave the theatre that they are inspired to continue pursuing this kind of transformative justice, and in so doing, see themselves and their communities in a new way.

## TEXT ANALYSIS

### Title

The name Orestes is often translated from the Greek as “mountain dweller” and thus *The Oresteia* can be loosely translated as “mountaineering”—a title that might be in reference to Orestes’ relationship with the gods, or simply to the treacherous and difficult journey the characters embark upon during the course of the plays. In *The Eumenides*, the last part of the original trilogy, Orestes travels to Athens in an attempt to escape the Furies. The trial Orestes undergoes takes place on a large rock outcropping called the ‘Areopagus’ (roughly translated as ‘the hill of Ares’). During the time of the ancient Greeks, those accused of deliberate homicide were required to climb this rock and stand before a judicial tribunal of their peers who convened at this location. Though not strictly a mountain, the title of Aeschylus’ trilogy may be a reference to the Areopagus—signaling the centrality of Orestes’ final trial rather the murders which preceded it. However, in McLaughlin’s adaptation, there is no journey to Athens and no mountaintop divine intervention. Orestes’ journey to the summit is more metaphoric—he must climb the mountain of his own guilt and there present himself for judgement by a jury of his

---

<sup>8</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. “Ellen’s Essay on the Oresteia.” *Ellenmclaughlin.com*, April 15, 2019. <https://www.ellenmclaughlin.com/ellen-blog/2019/4/16/ellen-on-the-oresteia>

peers (the Chorus). When Clytemnestra's ghost appears in Act III, she tells Orestes that he must "crawl up the holy mountain on your raw knees in the blind, cold night, seeking forgiveness—will you ever find it for what you've done?"<sup>9</sup>

### **Story of the Play/Synopsis**

Queen Clytemnestra and the citizens of Mycenae await the return of King Agamemnon from the Trojan War. Clytemnestra is haunted by Agamemnon's murder of their daughter Iphigenia, an act done to gain favorable winds from the gods for the voyage to Troy. When Agamemnon victoriously returns ten years later, he is graciously welcomed home by his wife. Cassandra, a Trojan priestess brought home as Agamemnon's captive, prophesies that his homecoming will only end in bloodshed, but no one heeds her warning due to a curse from the god Apollo. Having never forgiven her husband, Clytemnestra slays both Agamemnon and Cassandra, burying them outside the house. Ten more years pass and Clytemnestra's long-lost son Orestes returns home in disguise. Compelled by Apollo and urged by his sister Electra, Orestes murders his mother as retribution for her matricide. Orestes is then beset by immense guilt and grief (personified momentarily by the Furies) and can only be freed from his torment if he is judged by his peers for his matricide. The Chorus stand in judgement, deciding whether Orestes must pay for what he's done. The Chorus, satisfied neither with eye-for-eye vengeance or with ignoring Orestes' crime, choose reconciliation by washing the blood clean from his and Electra's hands.

### **Themes**

- **Justice:** As I've hopefully demonstrated, the question of justice is ultimately at the heart of any production or adaptation of *The Oresteia*. Though the gods are more noticeably absent in McLaughlin's adaptation than in Aeschylus' original text, the contrast between retributive justice and restorative justice still resonates. In the original play these two perspectives are embodied by the blood vengeance of the primal Furies, and the enlightened justice of the Olympian gods (which was then

---

<sup>9</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 71.

gifted to the people of Athens). However, in this adaptation, the justice of all the gods (Furies and Olympians alike) is retributive, and ultimately humans are left to bring about restoration on their own. This is a world in which characters associate “rightness” with the will of the gods. The Trojan War was justified not because it was fundamentally honorable, but because the god allowed the Greeks to win. It is a world where transgressors must be punished and where the gods demand sacrifices (blood for blood) in order to be appeased. In this way, Orestes symbolically becomes justice, as the vengeful arm of Apollo himself. However, as the characters realize, this kind of retaliatory justice doesn’t bring true peace. Clytemnestra warns her children that “killing me won’t bring your father back.”<sup>10</sup> While this might be a selfish attempt to save her life, it is also shrewd warning about the folly of revenge which does not satisfy and only perpetuates cycles of grief and violence. Like her mother, Electra believes that “justice is patient and time means nothing to the truth”<sup>11</sup> and therefore waits and waits for her mother to receive her just punishment. However, once Electra’s wish is fulfilled, she is unsatisfied, questioning what benefit retribution has actually given her. The play ultimately interrogates who justice is really for—the victims of a crime or the society in which we all live—and whether justice is about personal satisfaction or about creating a humane society in which we can live with accountability and fellowship.

- **Providence:** While the role of the gods is more pronounced in Aeschylus’ the *Oresteia* than in her adaptation, McLaughlin is still concerned with whether the gods are actually interested in human affairs. Throughout the play, the characters often indicate that the gods only communicate through metaphors and symbols; only directly engage with mortal through the deeds of other mortals; and only demonstrate their love by making humanity suffer. Cassandra and Orestes both embody a lack of agency that reflects their communion with the gods—they have very little control over their actions; are constantly questioning their purpose; and are ultimately forsaken by the deities that claim authority over them. Once Orestes has

---

<sup>10</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 64.

<sup>11</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 20.

accomplished what Apollo required of him, he is promptly abandoned, left on his own to sort out the repercussions of what he was divinely compelled to do. The implicit certainty of the gods is no longer discernable, and Orestes is left swimming in a sea of his own doubt and grief. The Chorus wonder if they should wait for the gods to intervene and resolve the violence since they were part of its cause, but the Chorus decide that since this tragedy has become a human problem, it therefore demands a human solution. Clytemnestra rejects the idea of providence altogether, deriding Agamemnon's superstitious fears, and purportedly raising Electra as "godless as a donkey."<sup>12</sup> She does still believe in fate, claiming that Agamemnon was fated to return home and die by her hand. However, this is not a divine intervention—she stands in defiance of providence by taking matters into her own hands and meting out punishment where she believes the gods would not.

- **Inheritance:** Though there is a family drama at the core of *The Oresteia*, the royal family also serves as a metaphoric microcosm for the fate of the nation. The House of Atreus is not just a house—the health and prosperity of its leaders impact the whole kingdom. At the beginning of the play, the family and the citizenry have already inherited a state in disorder and decay. The sins of the father (Tantalus, Atreus, Agamemnon) have been passed down, re-opening and re-infecting the old wounds in a continual cycle of intergenerational trauma. Clytemnestra warns Orestes against perpetuating the family violence: "any wound you would make in me would open in you and never heal,"<sup>13</sup> but her warning is unheeded. Thus all three of Agamemnon's children are cursed, marked by the bloodthirstiness of their forebears and the gods. Each child shares the same nightmare throughout the play, ending every time with them declaring that they cannot be helped or saved. However, the cursed inheritance stops with Orestes and Electra—the Chorus notes that neither sibling have any progeny, and therefore cannot have blood vengeance enacted upon them. Thus the Chorus is bequeathed the dilemma of justice, a lamentable inheritance, which they use to ultimately repudiate vengeance as an acceptable path forward.

---

<sup>12</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 45.

<sup>13</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 62.

- **Time/Memory:** Just before the end of Act I, the Chorus offers one of the play’s clearest exploration of the role of time in the narrative: “The past, which we are always tinkering with, twisting and remaking it, asking it back so that we might...what? Know what it was? Try to get it right this time? Bury it better? So we can forget it for good? The past. Which is not past. We dust the mud off graves to let it blink at us again, reborn and familiar.”<sup>14</sup> In this world, memory is never something that solely resides in the past but is shown time and time again to influence the present, and dictate the future. Throughout the play memory, dreams, and truth collide, underscoring how difficult it is for the characters to escape the past, even in their dreams. Characters also often latch onto their memories or recollections of events as a way of justifying their actions. Clytemnestra remembers her “perfect” daughter and thus feels justified in killing Agamemnon. Electra remembers Agamemnon as an idealized father which thereby feeds her hatred of the mother who killed him. Even Orestes’ defense is framed by his desire to escape back into the memory of a time before the murders, before Apollo possessed him. Ultimately the play’s answer to escaping the past is not to bury it, but to release it and thereby face the reality and consequences of the present.

## Genre

Greek Tragedy

## Conventions

- Greek Chorus
- Direct Address
- Dreams & Nightmares
- Recounting off-stage action

---

<sup>14</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 36.

- Rituals (esp. burial)
- Household Chores
- Courtroom drama
- Ghosts (seen and unseen)
- Possession by another entity
- Divine Intervention
- Prophecy & Visions

### **Significant Given Circumstances**

- The Trojan War lasted ten years
- Clytemnestra and Helen are sisters (daughters of Leda)
- Agamemnon and Menelaus are brothers (sons of Atreus)
- Agamemnon is the King of Mycenae and Menelaus was the King of Sparta
- The Trojan War was ostensibly fought for Menelaus to rescue his wife Helen who had been spirited away to Troy by the Trojan prince Paris (see the story of The Judgment of Paris, and Homer's *The Iliad*)
- Agamemnon's great grandfather Tantalus killed his son Pelops and tried to feed him to the gods to test their omniscience. Agamemnon's father also slaughtered his nephews and cooked and served them for dinner
- Clytemnestra professes not to believe in the gods
- The winds have stopped blowing, preventing the armies of Agamemnon and Menelaus from departing to Troy
- Agamemnon murders his eldest daughter Iphigenia, offering her as a sacrifice to appease the gods and restore the winds (the myths provide various reasons for how Agamemnon offended the gods)
- Iphigenia has a recurring dream about a pregnant hare torn apart by two eagles which foretells her own murder
- Orestes never met his father (Clytemnestra was pregnant when Agamemnon left for Troy)

- Cassandra is a princess of Troy and priestess of Apollo, kidnapped and brought home by Agamemnon
- Cassandra has prophetic visions but is cursed by the god Apollo to never be believed when she prophesies
- Apollo is an Olympian deity known as the god of light, poetry, music, and prophecy
- The Chorus members are the household staff of the House of Atreus.
- Ten years pass between Act I and Act II
- Clytemnestra sent Orestes away from Mycenae as a child to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy that he would be the cause of her death
- Clytemnestra has a dream about breastfeeding a snake which foretells her own murder
- Orestes believes that he is possessed by the god Apollo who compels him to carry out the murder of his mother
- The Furies are ancient, primal deities of blood vengeance

### **Characters (Super-objective and Obstacle)**

**Clytemnestra:** to protect her own; her belief that she can control things

**Agamemnon:** to uphold an image power and control; his own pride

**Orestes:** to restore his peace; others' plans for vengeance (Apollo, Clytemnestra, Electra)

**Electra:** to correct what has been wronged; the fire of her own hatred

**Cassandra:** to survive; everyone dismisses her visions/prophecies

**Iphigenia:** to implore people to truly see her; her fateful faith in family

**Chorus:** to tend the house; the messes constantly being made by the royal house

Even though Orestes is absent from Act I of *The Oresteia*, he is arguably the protagonist of the story and his presence and importance is keenly felt throughout. However, I do think that the audience is meant to most clearly relate to the Chorus, the everyday people of Mycenae. Ultimately the Chorus' perspective and their role in community accountability is *our* role as well—we understand our own duty to justice and mercy best through their example.

### Significant Relationships

- **Clytemnestra and Agamemnon:** Even before the murder of Iphigenia, it is clear that Clytemnestra and Agamemnon do not share the same fundamental worldview. As both a king and military leader, Agamemnon is duty-bound to his kingdom. Despite Clytemnestra's rebuke that Agamemnon has no spiritual life, he does appear to be keenly aware of how the gods judge his actions and can bring favor or disfavor to his endeavors. Clytemnestra however does not share her husband's beliefs which only compounds their enmity when Agamemnon murders their daughter for the sake of those same beliefs. In Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*, the murder of Iphigenia is unseen (though dramatized elsewhere in Greek theatre such as Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*). By showing us the impact of Agamemnon's act, and removing Clytemnestra's scheming lover Aegisthus from the narrative, McLaughlin provides clearer insight and empathy for Clytemnestra's grief and rage. Here Clytemnestra's duty is to her children, and by killing Agamemnon, she believes that she can best avenge and protect them. When Agamemnon returns, he is so blinded by his own triumphant homecoming that he does not question Clytemnestra's warm reception despite the circumstances of his departure ten years before. Clytemnestra knows her husband well enough to inflate his ego and even play to his spiritual beliefs in order to stay his suspicions. Once Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon and Cassandra, she argues that he knew her well enough to have known that his return would result in this end.
- **Clytemnestra and Orestes:** Clytemnestra has deep, evident love and affection for Orestes her youngest child, with whom she was still pregnant when Agamemnon

departed for Troy. During Agamemnon's absence, Clytemnestra gave birth to Orestes but did not raise him on her own—Chorus F remarks that she was really the one who raised Orestes as Clytemnestra was too distracted by her own pain and troubles. During the events of Act II, Clytemnestra has not seen her own son in ten years, having sent him away as a child in the hopes that she could avoid the prophecy that he would avenge his father's death. One might argue that the smarter course of action once Clytemnestra knew their fates would've been to kill him then and there. However, Clytemnestra could not do what her husband had done—kill her own child to benefit herself. Clytemnestra makes it clear that she wants Orestes safe, that part of the purpose of sending him away was so that the family line could continue free from the rot of the house. However, Act II opens with Clytemnestra having a nightmare in which she nurses a snake which then takes her life. Only too late does she realize the snake in her dream is Orestes, pleading with him to defy fate and the gods and spare her life. "You are the shape of my mercy,"<sup>15</sup> she tells him moments before her death. Orestes does not want to kill Clytemnestra but can no longer resist Apollo who compels him to strike her down. The immense guilt Orestes feels over his matricide ultimately complicates the Chorus' perspective on rendering a just punishment for his crime.

- **Iphigenia and Clytemnestra/Agamemnon:** Though her interactions with them in the text are brief, it is immediately clear that the relationship between Iphigenia and her parents is very generous and loving. Clytemnestra and Agamemnon both appear to have the instinct to protect their innocent daughter from threats both internal (her dreams) and external (physical harm). However, despite his obvious care for his daughter, Agamemnon still ultimately makes the self-serving choice to sacrifice her to save himself, placate the gods, and fight his war. It is unclear, in this adaptation, how willingly Iphigenia sacrifices her life for her father's cause, but it is implied that she is prepared to acquiesce her needs/desires to those of her father even to the point of death. Iphigenia's death catalyzes Clytemnestra's story—she is previously a bystander in the tragedy of the House of Atreus, but her husband's act of violence

---

<sup>15</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 64.

compels her to seek revenge. Though her grief and rage are underestimated by everyone around her, her fierce loyalty to her daughter becomes her driving purpose. Clytemnestra's devotion to her daughter's memory also inspires neglect and even disdain for her other children—ignoring the very real anguish they experienced at the loss of their father, and thereby weaponizing Iphigenia's memory (which has been made perfect through her death) against Electra.

- **Clytemnestra and Electra:** Though it may have been more loving at one point, the relationship we see between Clytemnestra and Electra in Act II is extremely contentious. As with Agamemnon, Clytemnestra has a fundamentally different worldview than her daughter including a deep disagreement about humanity's duty to the gods. It is indicated that Clytemnestra relegated Electra to a role as a member of the domestic cleaning staff rather than a child of her own royal house. Clytemnestra evidently does not want Electra in the house—telling her that she is free to leave and is not of “any use to [her].”<sup>16</sup> Electra stays because she does not have anywhere else to go, and because she wants to continue stoking the fires of her hatred for Clytemnestra. Electra carries with her many loving memories of Agamemnon, despite Clytemnestra deriding Electra for mythologizing her absent father. In a particularly heated exchange Clytemnestra refers to Iphigenia as Agamemnon's “best little girl”<sup>17</sup> implying that Electra was not as loved by her father despite Electra's insistence that she and her father shared a special connection. Despite her abiding hatred, Electra still cannot bring herself to murder Clytemnestra, instead waiting for “a resolve to awaken in me [...] the ability to do this thing.”<sup>18</sup> When her younger Orestes arrives, Electra's dream of an avenging angel appears to have been fulfilled. Though Electra rejoices at Clytemnestra's death at the end of Act II, her speech at the beginning of Act III indicates that the revenge she so desperately sought does not bring her true peace.

---

<sup>16</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 45.

<sup>17</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 47

<sup>18</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 50.

- **Orestes and Electra:** Since Orestes was sent away from home many years ago, Orestes and Electra have never truly known one another. Electra refers to Orestes as “lost”<sup>19</sup> or as good as dead because he has been gone from home for so long. Her dream of him returning becomes reality, but instead of being happy to see him for who he is, she only sees him as the arm of the gods’ justice come home to enact vengeance. Though Orestes tells his sister of his constant inner turmoil, even going so far as to call himself a ghost of who he was, Electra only sees this as a favorable turn of fortune. Electra even transforms Orestes’ wish for a moment to grieve his father into a ritualistic plea for retribution. It isn’t until Act III that Electra appears to have pity on Orestes and his haunted state, hinting that she shares in some of his feelings of madness. Electra ultimately advocates for Orestes, seeking to protect him from the Chorus who stand in judgment over them both. Electra and Orestes share the same fate in the end—they are cleansed of their mother’s blood and shown grace.
- **House of Atreus and Chorus:** The Chorus serve as the domestic staff for the royal House of Atreus in Mycenae. The text indicates that they have been working for many years, keeping the house limping along. Several of the Chorus members served as nurses for Clytemnestra’s children, while others had children (and other family members) of their own that were conscripted to fight in the Trojan War. Though the Chorus knows the whole sordid history of the house, they actively appear to ignore it, turning a blind eye to its decaying foundation and the ways the deterioration continues to have poisonous repercussions in the present. Instead, the Chorus go about their daily chores, choosing not to interfere or intercede in the impending misfortunes they suspect are about to occur. Though they sympathize with Clytemnestra and are ambivalent about Agamemnon’s return, they are collectively horrified by the murderous events of Act I. As Act II begins, they continue their daily toils awaiting the inevitable consequences. When Orestes murders his mother, the Chorus become the Furies, embodying for a moment the vengeful lineage of the house. In Act III, while they serve as Orestes’ judges and jury, Electra makes it clear

---

<sup>19</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 51.

that they are also “of this house”<sup>20</sup> and therefore also share in its fate.

## Structure of the Play

Broadly speaking, the play is split into three acts with each act covering the action of one of the original plays of Aeschylus’ the *Oresteia*—Act I covers the events of *Agamemnon*; Act II covers the events of *The Libation Bearers*; and Act III covers the events of *The Eumenides*. As mentioned previously, because of the massive time jump between Acts I and II, I am currently planning to hold an intermission between these sections of the play. Since very little time elapses between Acts II and III, I do not plan for there to be any act break there. There will need to be a brief transition for the actors to set for the top of the act, and I do intend to craft a short, wordless transition to allow for some logistical considerations (blood!), and to tell the story of the aftermath of Clytemnestra’s murder.

Before the opening of *Agamemnon* (Act I), we are told that ten years have elapsed since the king’s departure for Troy, quickly establishing the time Clytemnestra has been consumed by her anger and grief. After the explosive events of Act I, there is a second ten-year time gap in which we witness the slow descent of the kingdom of Mycenae into disarray. It is here that we find Electra ruminating on her own plans for revenge. Act II catapults us towards its inevitable conclusion and then quickly transitions into Act III which appears to be, at most, a day after the events of the second act. There is a clear compression of time as the action becomes more immediate and dire. In order to work on the show in more manageable sections, I will be dividing the play’s structure according to French scene conventions (later into ‘events’ within these scenes), though this will be done with a bit of flexibility to allow for more robust rehearsal call schedules:

### Act I:

- Year Up Here Listening (4) Chorus A-Watchman
- Clytemnestra’s Dreams (4-6), Clytemnestra, Chorus

---

<sup>20</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 77.

- The Past Comes Alive (6-9), Clytemnestra, Chorus, Iphigenia
- Agamemnon's Faith (9-12), Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Iphigenia
- It's Just the House (12-13), Clytemnestra, Iphigenia
- Time Before the War (13-16), Chorus
- A Sacrifice (16-18), Chorus, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Iphigenia
- Victory! (18-20), Chorus, Clytemnestra
- War is Finished (20-24), Chorus
- A Conqueror Returns (24-27), Chorus, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Iphigenia
- And Yet (27-30), Chorus, Cassandra, Clytemnestra
- A Broken Thing (30-35), Chorus, Cassandra
- Get it Right This Time (35-39), Chorus, Iphigenia
- Heavy with Justice (39-40), Chorus, Clytemnestra

Act II:

- 10 Years Gone (41-43) Chorus
- New Nightmare (43-44) Chorus, Clytemnestra
- Meaning to Suffering (44-49), Clytemnestra, Electra
- Common Hatred (49-52) Electra, Chorus G
- Home (52-58) Electra, Orestes, Agamemnon
- Man with the Knife (58-65) Electra, Orestes, Clytemnestra, Chorus

Act III:

- Errands for the Inferno (66) Electra, Orestes, Chorus
- Alone with Them (67-70) Electra, Orestes, Chorus
- Unmothered (70-71) Electra, Orestes, Chorus, Clytemnestra
- Clean this House? (71-81) Orestes, Electra, Chorus
- Born For It (81-82) Orestes, Electra, Chorus
- Another Way (83-84) Orestes, Electra, Chorus

When breaking the play down this way, one notices a lot more on-and-off action in Act I. There are more characters and flashbacks before the scope of the play becomes narrower and more focused in Acts II and III.

## Language

Many other adaptations and translations of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* have replicated the verse structure of the original text. While McLaughlin opted to write her adaptation in prose, many passages of text—primarily the monologues or speeches delivered by the characters, and passages of dialogue from the Chorus—still retain a distinctive poetic quality. While they do not have any set rhyming pattern or meter, the language of these passages still has a heightened quality that sets them apart from the comparatively conventional dialogue found in the rest of the play. Throughout some of the more poetic passages of the Chorus, there is a significant amount of repetition and overlapping speech. There are repeating words (“But still” as on page 14) or sounds (“Helen/Hell-on” as on page 20) which gives the Chorus’ speech a distinctive, rippling rhythmic quality. This is especially true as these words and phrases occasionally overlap, sometimes giving the impression that the group is speaking with one voice or one mind. McLaughlin also assigns several repeated lines of text to the children of Agamemnon which originate from the dream which they all appear to share (“Daddy?” “She [no one can] can’t help me.” “Only Daddy and he won’t.”<sup>21</sup>) These phrases recurring throughout the play underscore the cyclical nature of the generational trauma the House of Atreus faces—each of the children share in the torment wrought by their predecessors.

It is also worth noting instances throughout the play that reference characters’ inability to speak, or their speech being misunderstood. When recounting her prophetic dream, Iphigenia notes that within the dream she cannot speak. This image is echoed several times with Agamemnon physically stopping Iphigenia from making a declaration of love, and the manifestation of Iphigenia’s ghost wearing a bright red gag. When Cassandra arrives, the other characters pointedly note her unwillingness to speak, commenting on her silence several times. The first time she speaks, her first few lines are in Greek, which the Chorus does not understand. Even when Cassandra switches back into English, her prophetic words are only half-understood or willfully ignored by those around her. While this is likely due to Cassandra’s Apollonian curse, other characters also reference the fact that symbols, dreams, and metaphors are one of the only means by which mortals can understand the gods—the gods do not use traditional language

---

<sup>21</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 12, 53, 68.

and can only be comprehended through cryptic riddles that need to be interpreted or mediated by mankind.

## **Rhythm and Mood**

The mood and rhythm of *The Oresteia* is fascinating to me—it is one part family tragedy; one part ghost story; and one part suspenseful courtroom drama. The design team and I have frequently discussed the feeling of imminent collapse or impending doom being present in the show—it’s a play that keeps you anxious about what ill-fated misfortune might occur. Disaster always seems as though it is about to strike the house. While there is some comedy throughout the script, McLaughlin builds in moments to release the buildup of tension primarily through the use of choral speeches. While these speeches don’t always move the action forward, they allow the audience to reflect on previous beats and themes. As mentioned earlier, I am also interested in exploring the relationship of ‘horror’ in this piece and the impact of that style of storytelling on the play’s mood. *The Oresteia* is both a haunted and haunting tale—it may startle in some moments, lyrically soar in others, but ultimately it should unsettle us. The play should turn our gaze uncomfortably back at ourselves as we grapple with how we might perpetuate or break the cycles of retribution in which we find ourselves.

## **Reversals**

There are several important reversals in *The Oresteia*—a play about turning the previously conceived rules of community, spirituality, family, and hospitality on their heads:

- Agamemnon murders his daughter to gain favor from the gods
- Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon & Cassandra
- Orestes murders his mother under duress from the god Apollo
- The Chorus transforming into the Furies (provides a new perspective)
- Orestes is now cursed for his matricide
- The Chorus become the judges of the House of Atreus

- The Chorus' final act of grace—the handwashing

While there may be several other smaller reveals throughout the play that move the action forward, the main reversals above are the narrative points where our preconceived notions about what these characters are capable of, or what their established purpose is, becomes subverted. With Agamemnon's murder of Iphigenia it is established that he would "do anything"<sup>22</sup> for her, and yet he still murders her for his own gain. Though Clytemnestra makes her intention to avenge Iphigenia's death clear, the lengths that she ultimately goes to including the murder of Cassandra (which it is not clear during their interaction she had the intention of committing) to fulfill her aim. With Orestes' matricide, it is foretold and therefore should not come as a shock, but I think the key to understanding the reversal here is the intent—Orestes does not want to murder his mother but is compelled to do so by a god's possessive force. The most significant reversal is the role of the Chorus, who until the mid-point of Act III, have been passive observers of the tragedies that surround them. Suddenly they accept their role as judges, ultimately handing down their verdict, though perhaps not in the manner we might expect.

### **Climactic Moment**

Upon first glance, the climax of *The Oresteia* is slightly tricky to pinpoint since each act was originally a distinct play with its own rising action and climax. In the case of McLaughlin's adaptation, the climax clearly becomes Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra, which occurs at the end of the second act. This is the moment from which none of the characters can return and which they spend the entirety of the third act debating how best to resolve. Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, though perhaps as equally shocking and violent, is more akin to the inciting incident or 'first crisis' which sets the rest of the action of the play in motion. Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra serves as the highest 'second crisis' and the hung jury of the Chorus as the 'third' and final crisis that leads into the play's resolution.

---

<sup>22</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 12.

## **Section 2**

# **Design & Design Process**

I knew when first reading Ellen McLaughlin's play that the overall design concept for this production should both honor the play's classical roots, and recognize that this was McLaughlin's contemporary adaptation of the story rather than a traditional presentation of Aeschylus' original trilogy. To this end, it was clear to me that the production had the capacity to expand aesthetically beyond ancient Greek architecture and fashion to utilize current motifs. For the design team, this modern treatment became a way to make the timely thematic resonances of the play more accessible and immediately felt. In my research, I was particularly struck by one interview in which McLaughlin talks about Greek tragedy's capacity to speak to us today:

One can only write out of one's time. And I think that if you want to address your time, and whether you want to address it or not, you are to some extent always addressing it in the writing, in the present tense. But that said, there are things that I feel I can only approach correctly with the use, on some level, of a Greek play as a model or a structure on which I can lay whatever my concerns are, whatever my work is. I think that that's part of the reason they're so enduring. One of the reasons I think they're so helpful is that they're so old and that the religion practiced in the play is not practiced by anybody now and hasn't been for quite some time. And I think also that they're so old and they're so much a part of our culture, Western culture, that there is a way in which they don't belong to anyone which makes them different from any other plays I know well. [...] I feel that *The Oresteia* ended up becoming a way that I could grapple with the movement from the Obama era into the Trump era and the sense of outrage that that brought into the world. And so it gave me a way to talk about not only justice, but the fragility of democracy which I think is unfortunately an issue that has never been more lively in my lifetime. Because the Greeks were always concerned with the fragility of democracy because their democracy was extremely fragile, threatened from without and within, and the playwrights were always, Aeschylus less than Sophocles and Euripides, but they're always engaged in the fragility, the vulnerability of democracy and all of the questions that that brings. [...] So I find them poignant and meaningful in a way that as a

civilization they were really grappling on the deepest level with the deepest questions, and they're the questions that continue to be terribly significant for us.<sup>23</sup>

Early on in this process, a colleague mentioned the phrase “yanking the ancient into the present” to capture a general sense of the aesthetic world of this production. I found this phrase to be distinctly resonant—the world of *The Oresteia* is somewhere between past and present, a place where its temporal ambiguity also indicates no specific geographical location. The tenuous fragility of our current sociopolitical moment and the ways in which we see the fault lines at the cornerstones of modern democracies all over the world, became central to our early design conversations. Since the House of Atreus is the primary metaphor through which the audience understands these sociopolitical concepts, I knew that the state of the house and its inhabitants would be key to the design of the show. The designers and I often discussed the image of a grand house in disarray—there should be clear indications that the house was once a dynastic seat of power, but that the generational curse caused it to fall further and further into ruin. It is an arid, cheerless world full of ghosts, shadows, and decay. Instinctively we were all drawn to an extremely limited color palette to express these notions—this is not a world of warm, saturated colors, but one of deep greys and desaturated blues. During one of our early conversations, I had pulled some research images from the hit television show *The Handmaid's Tale* which featured many of the characters of status dressed in muted teals and blues within a monochrome world, and I used this as one the primary touchpoints for the color-world of the play. As with *The Handmaid's Tale*, the one chromatic exception we discussed for our show was the vibrant red of blood. The presence of blood is incredibly significant in *The Oresteia*

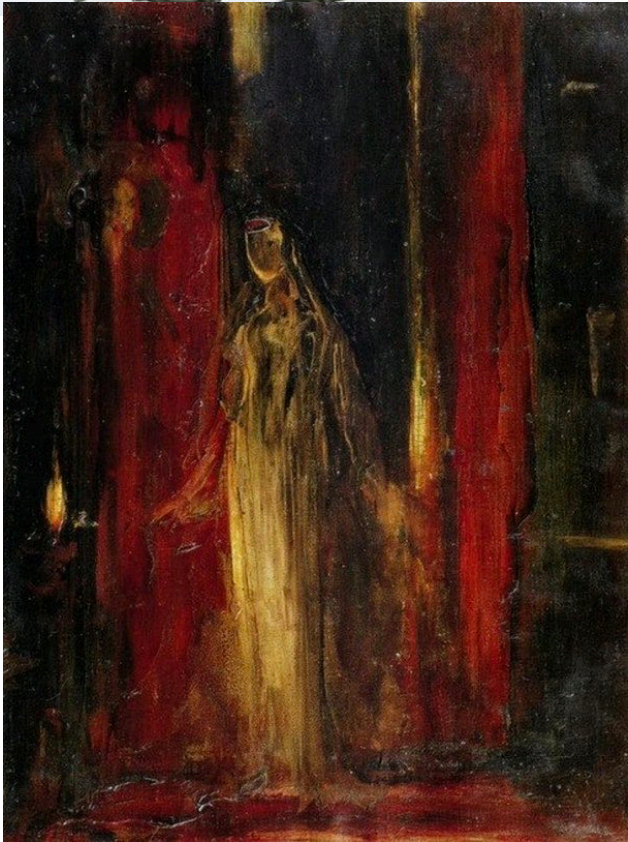


particularly as it transitions from fabric-blood to liquid-blood from Act I to Act II. Therefore, we

---

<sup>23</sup> “TFANA Talk: The Oresteia (June 26, 2021).” *YouTube*, uploaded by Theatre for a New Audience, 26 June, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvAKRT7EKz8&t=444s>.

opted to keep the color palette of the world extremely muted and limited to allow this one bright color to emerge as a dominant visual gesture. Though I did not realize it at the time, all these ideas were present in the initial emotional research I presented to the team at the start of this process. A few select images from this research are included here:





The design team started our conceptual conversations in earnest during August 2022 while the show's original costume designer Jenni Gile was still in London finishing her UW Professional Quarter. Finding opportunities to meet proved difficult as I was working a full-time summer job at that time, and the time-difference to London meant that our team meetings could typically only occur on weekend mornings. During these preliminary conversations, there were several meetings Jenni missed for a variety of personal reasons, which made it difficult from the start to unite the whole team on the overall vision, mood, and style of the show. Once Jenni was back in Seattle, I was able to coordinate several in-person meetings with the entire design team in October and November 2022. However, the scenic designer Brandon Riel then left for Chicago in November 2022 to begin his UW Professional Quarter which once again made scheduling full-team meetings difficult. However, I continued to meet with the designers one-on-one as the designs were finalized and sent to the shops for the start of the build process.

## Scenic Design

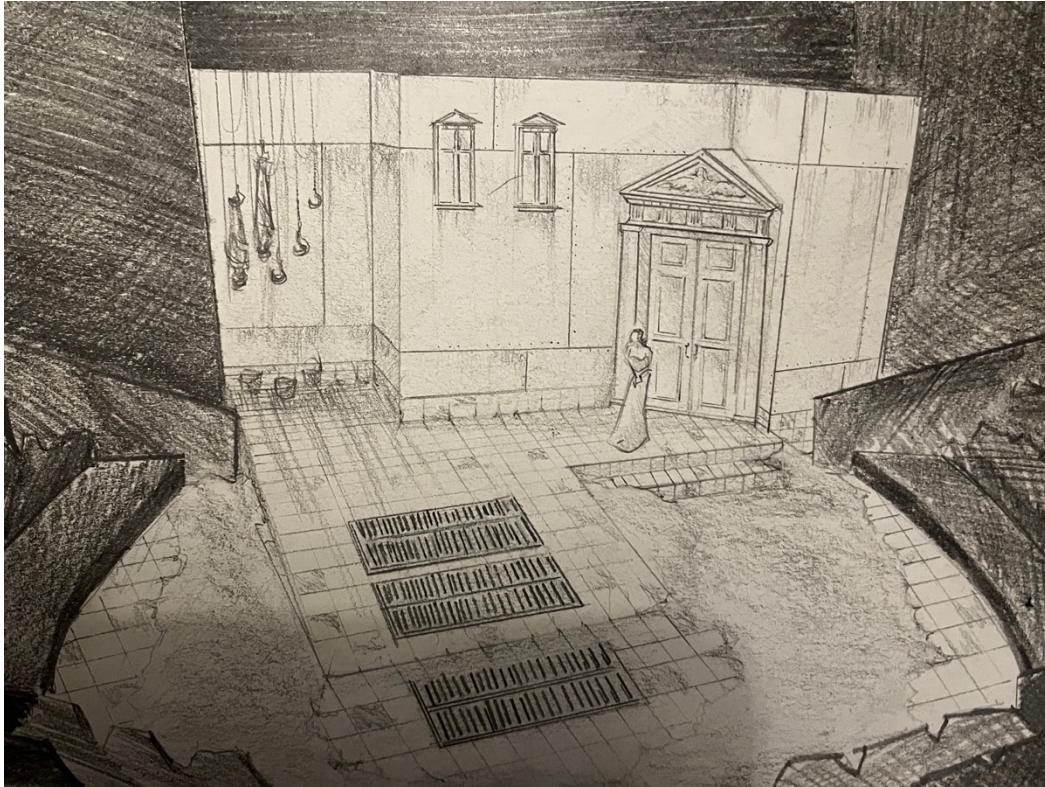
From our earliest conversations, Brandon and I discussed the importance of the house as a symbol of the decline of both the royal family and the health of the nation they govern. McLaughlin opens the play with a stage direction where she refers to the setting simply as “the ancient house.”<sup>24</sup> Elsewhere in the text, it is referred to by the characters as “a reliquary [...] a museum;” “house of spite;” killing floor of innocents;” “old and honeycombed;” and a house of “tricks and slaughter.”<sup>25</sup> Brandon and I agreed that since all of the action occurs outdoors, that the scenic design should clearly indicate how the original sins of the house—the many murders and acts of cannibalism that have marred and cursed the family—cannot be hidden or contained behind closed doors and must somehow spill out into the open air. We also knew that the scenic design should immediately create a sense of looming dread for audience members once they enter the space. Much of the initial inspirational research Brandon and I reviewed featured sinkholes, abandoned houses, warehouses in states of neglect and disrepair, haunted houses, and ancient archeological ruins. This research, which we returned to frequently throughout this process, evoked the foreboding atmosphere we sought to bring to the design.

---

<sup>24</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 4

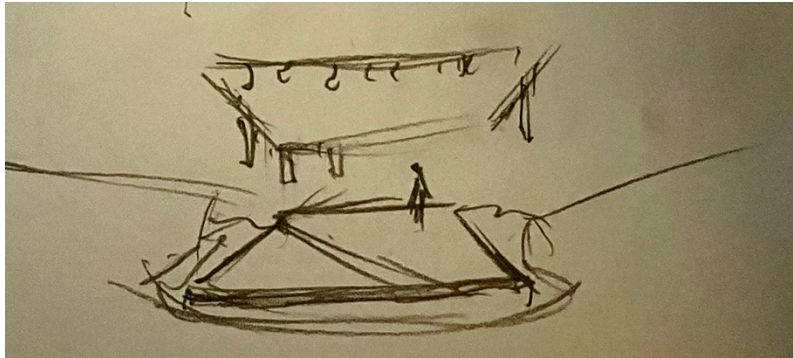
<sup>25</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 4, 31, 41.

At this stage, some of Brandon’s research expanded to include inspiration from literal slaughterhouses—tile flooring and walls, metal grates in the floor, and large metal hooks hanging throughout the space. This research directly influenced one of his earliest design concepts, as seen in the sketch below:

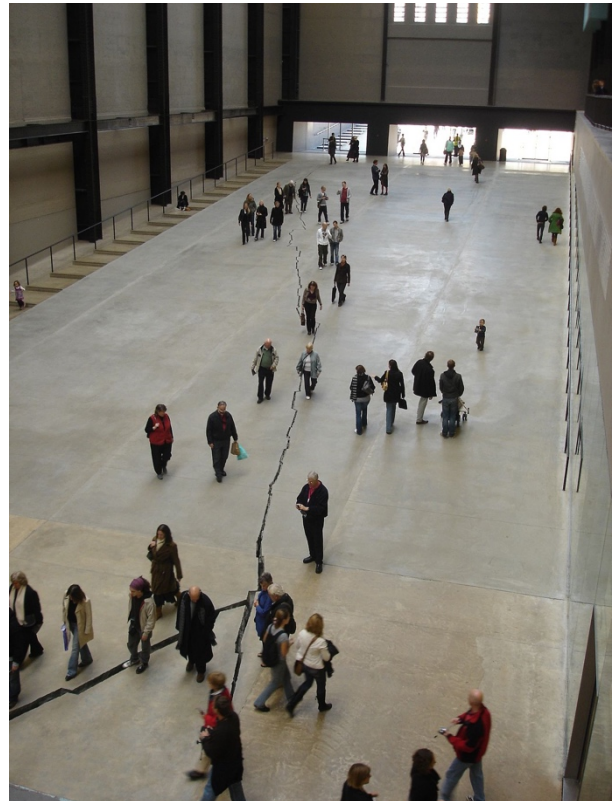


While the spirit of this sketch felt emotionally resonant, we quickly agreed that it narrowed the scope of the world of the play in a way which was not dramaturgically supported by the text. There was also a pronounced incongruity between this slaughterhouse aesthetic and several of the neoclassical architectural elements Brandon integrated into the house’s façade. Additionally, with the tile flooring and the high walls fully encompassing the stage, the design gave the impression of an indoor space which we knew would create some confusion for the audience given the play’s stated exterior setting. However, we were both really excited about the off-kilter feeling of the raked platform, and the way in which the dirt seemed to overtake the man-made space. At this same meeting, Brandon briefly showed some other rough sketches.

Amongst these sketches I spotted a small drawing Brandon had done of a large platformed space featuring a large crack or fissure down the center:



The sketch immediately reminded me of artist Doris Salcedo's 2007 installation *Shibboleth* at London's Tate Modern. For this installation, Salcedo cracked the floor of the museum's famous turbine hall as a way to examine the racial and cultural divides in our world that create division and hate. In the description of the piece from the Tate Modern, the museum writes, "the word 'shibboleth' refers back to an incident in the Bible, which describes how the Ephraimites, attempting to flee across the river Jordan, were stopped by their enemies, the Gileadites. As their dialect did not include a 'sh' sound, those who could not say the word 'shibboleth' were captured and executed. A shibboleth is therefore a token of power: the power to judge, reject and kill."<sup>26</sup> The visual connection to Salcedo's piece immediately resonated with me for a show about justice, authority, and our capacity to mend seemingly impossible divides. With this research in mind, I encouraged Brandon to pursue the idea of the cracked floor from his rough sketch.



Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*, Tate Modern, 2007

<sup>26</sup> Tate Modern Museum. "Doris Salcedo: *Shibboleth*." *Tateshots-1 October 2007*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/doris-salcedo-2695/doris-salcedo-shibboleth>

In the next scenic iteration, the crack in the ground and the presence of the dirt reappeared. However both elements became much more literal as the early research on sinkholes and abandoned houses reemerged. In this design, the house adopted a dilapidated 19<sup>th</sup> century farmhouse aesthetic instead of the minimalist, neoclassical appearance of the previous iteration:



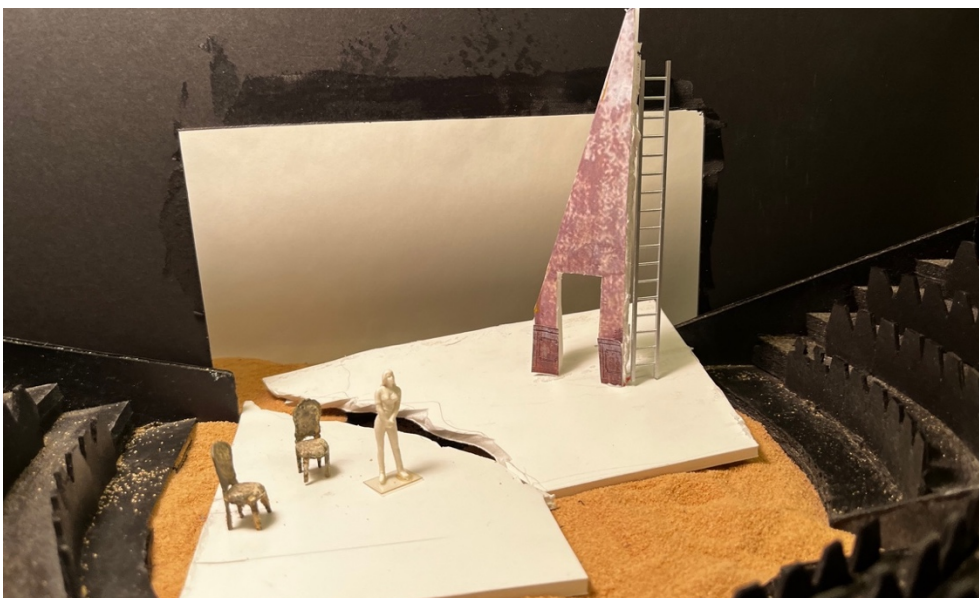
While this design conveyed a clearer story about the decline and decay of a family's generational wealth, it did not fully satisfy the operatic qualities that we all felt were a part of the script.

The next iteration returned us to the stark minimalism found in Brandon's preliminary crack sketch. Initially, Brandon was very resistant to revisiting the simplicity of this concept, insisting that he had already explored a conceptual, minimalist aesthetic in his previous work at the Jones Playhouse and that he wanted to have a broader range of work in his portfolio that included more historical architecture and natural elements. I reminded him that our primary goal was to serve the show by asking what the design needed in order for us to land the story and spine with the audience. Brandon agreed, and the cracked slab of stone was fully embraced, with half of it raked to appear as though it was sinking into the surrounding earth. The house itself

was first transformed into a series of walls with outdoor murals painted on them, and a fence from the previous farmhouse iteration placed to encompass the edges of the space:



Though the cracked slab of stone was an exciting development, we continued to struggle with how to evoke the character of the house itself. The high walls in this iteration, similar to Brandon's first design, implied an interior space rather than an exterior one. To circumvent this misunderstanding, Brandon then transformed the house into a triangular dagger shape jutting out from the floor:



While I was excited by the darkness and danger emerging in the design, the sharp dagger-like house did not adequately communicate a seat of power on the verge of collapse, and instead suggested an environment overwhelmed by the elements, where sovereignty had already crumbled or been cut off.

At this stage, Brandon and I began to struggle with semantics—we were pursuing the same ideas but were using vastly different terms to describe our experiences of each design iteration. Sensing that we were talking in circles, I suggested we return to the original research to see if we could identify the elements present in these images that most excited us. In doing so, we were reinvigorated by one of our earliest sources of inspiration—the box sculptures of Dutch artist Peter Gabriëlse. Gabriëlse’s meticulously crafted box sculptures features miniature interiors in various stages of deterioration. Brandon and I both gravitated to the manner in which the façades within Gabriëlse’s sculptures extend beyond the bounds of sight, making the spaces feel enormous despite their miniature scale. We weren’t sure that such an illusion would be possible in the Jones Playhouse given the limitations of the space, but Brandon began building various sketch models inspired by this concept. There was indeed an initial struggle to replicate the sense of scale present in Gabriëlse’s work while preserving a sense of *The Oresteia*’s outdoor setting. However, during one meeting while we were looking at a sketch model, I asked Brandon what would happen if he turned one of the upstage wall pieces upside down to create more space for the stormy skyscape which he had integrated into the previous dagger-like iteration. Suddenly, all of the elements began to click into place and we ended up moving towards our final design with only a few minor changes.



Peter Gabriëlse, 36 x 36 cm Square Box, Late 80s



With a large cracked stage deck forming the centerpiece of Brandon’s final design, directorial questions arose for me about how this would impact staging—how the actors should interact with the crack, and how its presence would affect the show narratively and thematically. Practically speaking, I wasn’t entirely sure when I agreed to the proposed design exactly how the crack would influence the show’s rhythm and picturization. Despite some functional challenges it posed, the raked and cracked deck also created numerous opportunities for stage pictures that might not have been possible on a un-raked set. The height of the upstage fragment of the deck established clear power positions, and the crack became a useful way to highlight the literal and metaphoric divide between specific characters with opposing viewpoints. There were also questions about whether the crack as a thematic and aesthetic gesture needed a full resolution or transformation by the show’s end. The designers and I discussed several options for significant scenic gestures to underscore the capacity of the house to move from decay to restoration, including the possibility of re-opening the grave to pull the bodies back out into the light or pouring a significant amount of water across the raked stage floor to wash away all the liquid stage blood. However, the more we considered these options, the more I was convinced that we should not heal or seal the crack, thereby implying that the play’s ending miraculously solved the

issues facing the characters. The fissure became a metaphor for the brokenness of the royal family and their nation, and as in all relationships, time is required for healing. The design team agreed that the true transformation at the conclusion of McLaughlin's *The Oresteia* is the acknowledgement that cleansing must begin with washing the blood from the *people* before any true cleaning and restoration of the environment can occur. However, we also felt that it was important to reference the crack in the story's resolution. Thus the final gesture of the show became about sitting amidst the discomfort of the crack and meeting Orestes and Electra where they are to begin process of reconciliation.

## **Lighting Design**

The development of the lighting design for *The Oresteia* primarily occurred in two phases: alongside the initial conception of the scenic and costume design, and over the course of technical rehearsals. As the world of the play evolved during our early design conversations, the show's lighting designer, Professor Andrew D. Smith, and I agreed that the lighting needed to embrace the same ominous, shadowy qualities we'd identified as foundational to the production's overall aesthetic. The starting point of our lighting discussions was once again the house—envisioning how the lighting could accentuate its looming features; situate it within the unforgiving, foreboding atmosphere; and underscore its influence on the action and relationships. From the outset, we gravitated towards chiaroscuro shading, cool hues, and long, dramatic shadows—a world of perpetual, nocturnal twilight. While I recognize that this stylistic choice may invite critiques regarding full actor visibility, Andrew and I thoroughly discussed how this adumbral approach would best reflect the thematic qualities and resonances of the play by creating a greater air of tension and mystery through the use of deep shadows and sharp contrast. Despite how tightly controlled this palette might seem, there were also times when Andrew would dramatically broaden specific lighting gestures in order to capture the more expansive nature of an expressionistic moment. At other times he would lean into a pared-down approach by reducing the lighting to a single light source to create an even more ominous atmosphere. The meticulous calibration of these choices evolved as the staging and the world of the play progressed throughout tech rehearsals.

In addition to these broader thematic ideas, it was important to delineate how lighting would communicate a clear sense of time within the play. Though the story takes place over several decades, each scene of the play occurs either at night or in the darkness of pre-dawn. For the majority of the play, this involved the use of green and blue gels on the lighting instruments. Since *The Oresteia* ostensibly takes place in one location and in various intervals of nighttime, we knew that the lighting would play a significant role in establishing the time of day, and an overall impression of atmosphere and climate. Furthermore, the lighting would also need to support several other story telling conventions. These conventions we identified included:

- Memories/Flashbacks
- Ghostly Apparitions
- Subjective Character Experiences (e.g. red streamer falling in Act I, or the Furies at the end of Act II)

A significant portion of Act I takes place within a memory/flashback. For this particular shift in time, Andrew opted for a softer look with slight rosy hues to create the sense that the characters were inhabiting a time before everything went wrong, when the possibility for change was still palpable. However, this tranquil state is swiftly disrupted by Iphigenia's murder, during which an enormous red streamer of fabric blood falls from the crest of the house, and the winds return to sweep the characters out of the memory. Since the appearance of the fabric blood streamer is a metaphoric event, it represents the subjective experience of Clytemnestra as she relives the memory of her daughter's murder. This was the first significant moment in the production where the established vocabulary was drastically expanded with the use of unnatural colors and the formation of intense spotlights on the characters. Similarly, the ghostly apparitions also broadened the palette of the show by adding a specialized spotlight from the stage right vomitorium used to cast large, unnatural shadows into the space and highlight the otherworldly qualities of these specters.

During one of our earliest run-throughs of Act I, Andrew commented on the expansive scale and scope of the act. As I mentioned while discussing the script's structure, a considerable amount of action occurs during Act I, and the largest variety of storytelling conventions are

employed. We noted that this grandiose, almost unwieldy quality of Act I evoked a sense of “past-ness,” with the act feeling like an amalgamation of memories, stories, and echoes, intensified in their magnitude through the process of recollection. Andrew opted to reflect this in the lighting design for Act I with an abundance of abstracted gestures, bold shadows, and the moments of unnatural illumination discussed above. However, we were also mindful of differentiating moments when the show would feel dreamlike, and when it would feel magical or supernatural. While these were often difficult, semantic distinctions, I relied on my own artistic and directorial instincts and training, Andrew’s keen eye and discernment, as well as a constant, open dialogue between the two of us to make these aesthetic judgments. While Act I largely resided in this broader, expressionistic style, we also wanted to craft a clear narrative and thematic arc to the lighting design of the show which would reflect the narrowing scope of the action throughout the play.

Act I is clearly juxtaposed with the more compressed precision and “present-ness” of Act II and Act III—a notion that the characters clearly reference at the top of Act II when they refer to their new reality as “this present tense.”<sup>27</sup> The lighting in Act II is more straightforward, as we wanted to emphasize the festering tensions and narrowing emotional confinement of the characters. With lighting that just grazes the boundaries of the cracked courtyard slab, Andrew sought to frame the space as a kind of boxing ring. This was done both to restrict the movement of the action, and impress upon both actors and audiences that there is no escape from the play’s inevitable conclusion. The first deviation from this vocabulary within Act II is the appearance of Agamemnon’s ghost. Due to the character’s unique route through the space, Andrew was unable to use the original ghost spotlight installed in the downstage right vomitorium, which would visually connect Agamemnon’s ghost with the appearance of Iphigenia’s ghost in Act I. Andrew opted to add an additional light in the stage left vomitorium to create a clearer sense of visual cohesion, which ultimately proved useful during the appearance of Clytemnestra’s ghost in Act III. The largest deviation from the relatively restrained scope of the lighting in Act II occurs when the Furies arrive. Once again the lights shift back to a bold, expressionistic gesture as the audience receives a glimpse of Orestes’ subjective perspective of this event. This scene turned out decidedly different than originally conceived because I altered the staging late into the tech

---

<sup>27</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 41.

process. However, in every iteration of this scene, the lighting transformed into a magical twilight to disguise the Furies' entrance; built into an explosive climax for the arrival of the blood; and remained in the starkness of bright white to reveal the full horror of the blood on Orestes.

For Act III, we were interested in a kind of “hollow” space—a barren, unnaturally quiet, comfortless wasteland. Electra refers to her new reality during the opening speech of Act III as a “new, raw silence.”<sup>28</sup> Andrew and I discussed how this feeling might be achieved by removing or curtailing almost all sound and lighting cues, creating a palpable simplicity and nakedness for almost the entire act. This also fits thematically with McLaughlin's intention that Act III be deeply humanistic—it creates an arena in which human beings must tell difficult, unvarnished truths on their journey towards reconciliation. As with Act II, the only exception to this stylistic arc within Act III is the appearance of Clytemnestra's ghost, which briefly reintroduces a spark of the supernatural back into the narrative. However, since her appearance serves a distinct emotional and narrative function, we felt that her appearance should clearly contrast the other ghostly apparitions. This was accomplished by removing all light from the cyc and illuminating Clytemnestra solely through the ghost spotlights in both vomitoria. Additionally at the end of the act, Andrew was interested in transitioning the light from its consistent nocturnal vocabulary, to a slightly warmer hue in order to generate a slight hint of approaching dawn. Though the play's final reconciliatory act does not fully solve the characters' current plight, it does illuminate, even dimly, a path forward—a gesture we hope this hint of daylight suggests.

One of the biggest challenges of the lighting design for *The Oresteia* was simply running out of time to fully explore specific lighting choices during tech rehearsals. Due to the runtime and expansive nature of this play, our team was often forced to move more quickly than we would've liked, and consequently several moments did not receive an adequate amount of attention or tech time to refine the timing or composition. Often this was simply a result of time-consuming technical set-ups such as the kabuki drop for the fabric blood streamer, which required several minutes for crew to re-set each time it was released. However, Andrew worked attentively all through our final tech rehearsal to continue clarifying and honing specific

---

<sup>28</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 66.

moments in order to advance them closer and closer to their aesthetic objectives. As previously mentioned, several staging revisions, such as the changes to the arrival of the Furies, also necessitated skillful design pivots. Though I would've loved more time to finesse this sequence in particular, it still conformed to the established vocabulary of the show and supported the thematic drive and action of the play. During these moments of high pressure and limited resources, Andrew was a consistently supportive, flexible, and thoughtful collaborator.

## **Costume Design**

The costume design process for this production has been a bit of a rollercoaster. Jenni Gile was the original costume designer, before University of Washington's Costume Shop Manager Ricky German assumed this role once Jenni departed from the MFA Design program in early January 2023. Jenni and I began design conversations during the summer of 2022, however our collaboration wasn't always smooth. From the beginning there was some misalignment on our overall vision of the show. While I was very interested in contemporary minimalism and an elegant, sleek aesthetic, Jenni gravitated towards complex color blocking, ornate detailing, and period silhouettes. Jenni initially advocated for a concept that adhered to more traditional ancient Greek clothing styles. As previously mentioned, from the beginning of this process I had expressed interest in updating the show to contemporary dress to exploit minimalism's ability to characterize a sense of power, and to further reference the modern resonances of this adaptation. As we dove further into our discussions, Jenni became more excited about this contemporary approach, though we agreed to include several subtle nods to the historical context of the play through some of the draping and silhouettes. Once we were aligned on the overall direction, Jenni and I then found that we were misaligned on how we viewed some of the play's characters and given circumstances, and how these perspectives would impact the costuming. For example, I saw Orestes as an ascetic wanderer in exile from his home in rough-spun garments that only hinted at his regal legacy, while Jenni was primarily interested in highlighting his princely-ness with more refined fabrics and polished accessories. Though these misalignments caused some friction in our collaboration, the overall direction and aesthetic grew clearer as we continued to share research and preliminary sketches.

Overall, I really resonated with Jenni's preliminary designs—Jenni had resisted many of her initial impulses for ornate detailing, and created a unembellished yet cohesive world that clearly aligned with the show's spine and the world we were crafting together. To achieve this look, Jenni and I initially went back and forth a few times about the color palette of the costumes. We briefly entertained the idea of jewel tones for the royal family, but swiftly strayed from this idea once the design team began to advocate for a more desaturated color-world. I was not initially enamored with the idea of a monochrome production, especially since I was concerned about the characters blending into the scenery rather than retaining their visual prominence onstage. One tactic Jenni suggested to prevent this was to integrate slightly saturated colors, particularly some subtle blues into the costumes by dip-dyeing them to deepen their hues, and by accessorizing them with colored belts or sashes. Another tactic suggested was to select fabrics with varied textures and brilliant sheens to highlight the characters under the lights and allow them to shine against the matte, muted set. Finding appropriately colored fabrics that also had the kind of sheens Jenni wanted proved difficult and we learned that many of these fabrics would cause issues once they interacted with certain scenic elements. For example, Jenni advocated for the use of a natural silk crepe de chine for one of Clytemnestra's dresses. However, the use of this fabric on the textured floor would have created significant snags and tears on the costume. Many of the fabric decisions were delayed as Jenni worked on finalizing the designs, and pivoted from her initial fabric choices to materials more compatible with the set.

The most significant obstacle in the costume design process arose when the sketches transitioned into final renderings and the fabric swatches were chosen. Changes both to color and garment construction had been made from the initial sketches to the final renderings without any explanation or discussion with me prior to their completion and presentation to the costume shop for the start of build. When I began to ask clarifying questions in order to better understand the reasons behind these changes, my concerns were dismissed or resisted. Throughout this stage of the process I lost some of the trust that had previously been established between Jenni and I. This in turn prompted me to intently scrutinize all new information being provided by Jenni in ways that I do not think were ultimately conducive to either of our processes. Upon reflection, it would've been wiser to have set aside some of my concerns at that time and then strategized more helpful ways of addressing those notes during the fitting process. Before and after the

holiday break I consulted with Professor An-lin Dauber about how best to address the friction in this working relationship and communicate my notes in the new year. At the time I felt hopeful about how to proceed and what conversations needed to occur, but I never got to have any additional in-person discussions with Jenni before she departed from the MFA program.

On Monday, January 9, 2023, Ricky German officially assumed the role of costume designer for this production. The School of Drama received permission from Jenni to utilize her design concepts, so Ricky and I began conversations about how use these designs as a foundation in order to facilitate the costume shop's build process, which was already behind schedule. Since he had previously consulted with Jenni as she developed her designs, Ricky was familiar with the overall vision of the show and its progress, so his initial assumption of this role was smooth. Ricky, along with Val Mayse in the costume shop, re-drafted and re-draped several of the garments based on the notes I had hoped to give to Jenni, and some new fabrics were chosen to suit the budgetary and timeline restrictions now facing the production. Due to previous commitments, Ricky was unable attend technical rehearsals and was thus personally unable to see the designs through this stage of the process. Professor An-lin Dauber stepped in as costume designer during this period to continue making aesthetic adjustments and work with the shop to implement notes. Although Ricky and I maintained consistent communication throughout the build process of the production, the costume shop remained behind schedule and thus some of the final costume pieces appeared at tech unfinished, or different than originally conceived. However, during the tech process, the whole team worked to unify the disparate elements and retain the overall cohesion of the world of the play. Since the original renderings created by Jenni are not fully reflective of the costumes that ultimately appeared onstage, for the purposes of this paper I have included photographs of the finalized costume pieces from the production's photo call.

## **Clytemnestra**

Even in early conversations, I wanted to explore the duality of Clytemnestra's character and the way that she's both extremely vulnerable, wearing her heart on her sleeve, as well as being calculated and armored against any perceived threats. In the script she first appears in a dressing

gown, having awoken in the middle of the night from a nightmare. It was a look that also needed to make sense as her character drifted into a flashback. The deep plunge of the neckline and the sheer robe were garments that sought to highlight her vulnerability. The nightgown look is also her Act II costume, but with the addition of subtle terracotta mud stains along the bottom.



The staining was intended to indicate the passage of ten years between the acts; suggest her more and more frequent nocturnal wanderings in the yard; and reveal the way in which the murders she committed do not leave her unscathed. Clytemnestra’s final Act III ghost costume was constructed similarly to her previous nightgown looks but with the addition of a hood to hide the actress’ bright red hair. The use of the same dress pattern was done to create visual continuity for the audience, and to tie her into the Chorus colors and textures so that her reveal maintains an element of surprise. When Clytemnestra appears to welcome Agamemnon home in Act I, the script describes her as “formally dressed, impressive.”<sup>29</sup> The main term I returned to when describing her in this scene was “armored,” indicating how she’s shielding her heart and preparing to go into battle against her husband. The pleating, along with the high collar, became a straightforward way for us to indicate this shift in her attitude and status. The austere silhouette of the costume was also a way to show how Clytemnestra has assumed her husband’s power and

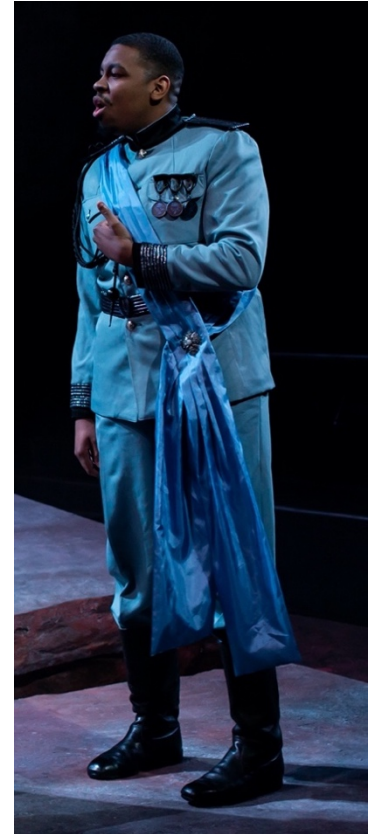
---

<sup>29</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 25.

position as a leader of the country in his absence with her adoption of his slightly darker color scheme. We initially looked at adding a version of Agamemnon's sash to the costume to further signal her usurpation of his militaristic authority, but this did not quite have the dramatic flair we had hoped, and eventually this element transformed into a full cape element which gave her a more "impressive" and startling appearance.

## **Agamemnon**

It was important for the audience to immediately understand that Agamemnon is not just a political figurehead, but a military leader constrained by the duty he feels to his country and to the men who serve under him. The decision he makes to murder his own daughter is ultimately one he makes in his capacity as a general—it's a strategic political and military action. In the original myth, it is explicitly stated that Agamemnon has made a pact with the other Greek generals to fight in his brother's war. Because he is likely the cause of the windless skies after offending the gods, he feels honor-bound to solve this dilemma which hampers their departure to Troy. His first costume needed to be very formal and ceremonial—a uniform that exudes pageantry, privilege, and ostentation. To get a sense of military accoutrement and stately ceremonial sashes, early research led us to contemporary military parades throughout Europe and even the Dior Men's Fall 2019 Collection. When Agamemnon returns from the war, his clothing takes on a darker hue as a sign of the shadows cast over him by the murder of his daughter and the acts of war he has committed in his long absence from the kingdom. Remnants of battle appear in his tarnished boots and tattered sash, and his still ceremonial, but more practical military uniform. Finally when Agamemnon returns as a ghost, his former look has transformed into a black suit, stained at the shoulders by the red earth surrounding the house, hinting at his unnatural resurrection from the grave.



## Orestes

With Orestes, we were interested in showing how he is still a part of the lineage of the House of Atreus, but that his time in exile and his relationship with Apollo have deeply shaped who he is upon his return home as an adult. In early design conversations, I had often referred to Orestes as a kind of religious ascetic, an itinerant wanderer in the desert who is never at peace. The high collar of his costume is reminiscent of Agamemnon's high collared military suit, referencing Orestes' almost militant pursuit of vengeance on his father's behalf. However, unlike his parents, his tunic is constructed from a rough-spun fabric with a silhouette reminiscent of a Catholic monk's tunic or chasuble, referencing his exile from his homeland and the more humble nature of his current circumstances. There is still a streak of rebelliousness in his costume with the asymmetric cut of his tunic and his punk-rock skinny jeans. Though the texture of his costume may be markedly different than his parents, there are still little hints of his royal lineage and the world he left behind, like the leather accents. His tunic has been designed with the intent that he remove it to reveal the a lighter-colored undershirt before the Chorus pours blood on him at the end of Act II.



## Electra

For Electra, her costume should reveal how she is both a part of the royal family and a part of the Chorus. Electra even says “That’s what I am. I am the help. That’s what you’ve done with me. Made me a skivvy in my own house.”<sup>30</sup> However, this is not a standard Cinderella narrative in which Clytemnestra keeps Electra at the house against her will—Electra embraces her role amongst the household staff out of deep parental disregard and neglect. Though Electra has largely been forgotten by her



<sup>30</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 45.

mother, she still finds every opportunity to taunt and plague her, hiding amongst the Chorus and emerging at inopportune moments. This youthful rebelliousness and anger is reflected in her costume with an edginess that also connects her with Orestes—the sleeveless, asymmetrical tunic conveys her sense of subversiveness to the established order of the royal house while not straying too far from the established world of the play. She also has the same high collar and leather accents to also indicate an affinity with her father. Her tunic has been designed with the intent that she remove it to reveal the a lighter-colored undershirt when she pours blood on herself at the end of Act II.

### **Cassandra**

Early conversations about Cassandra involved several central considerations: how to ensure that her character is not exoticized (as is a common and unfortunate tradition with this character) while making it clear that she is from a different country and culture (Troy); how to convey her sense of lost status as both a princess and priestess; and how to efficiently tell the story of her home’s destruction and her brutal journey to Mycenae. Early concepts for her costume began as simple linen sundresses, lightly distressed along the edges to show the effects of the war.

However, these early drafts did not feel specific enough—they did not fully reflect her role as a Trojan princess and a priestess of Apollo. Ricky then proposed constructing a highly draped gown

out of chiffon which could incorporate some painted and sculptural eye designs. This proposal directly referenced the ancient Greek tradition of painting fabrics to achieve certain hues and design patterns. However, this design ended up overwhelming the actress and prevented her from accomplishing the difficult physical movements required by her scenes. A new dress was introduced during tech which was a departure from some of the aesthetic ideas previously discussed, but captured the essence of these conceptual touchpoints. The rich lacework on the dress and its distinctive coloring and shape, effectively set Cassandra apart, and the distressing undeniably communicated the sacking and ravaging of her home.



## Iphigenia

With Iphigenia, because of the brevity of her appearances, it was vital for the audience to immediately recognize her youthfulness and innocence. The costume wanted to give the impression that because we see her only in a memory, she has been crystalized or locked into a perpetual state of adolescent perfection after her untimely death. The image of a young girl in white, evoking many innocent ingénues throughout history and literature, is a powerful one, and we wanted to use of this association to emphasize the true tragedy of her death. Though the nightgown went through several iterations in silhouette and fabric, we finally settled on a look that we felt visually associated her with Clytemnestra while maintaining this childlike quality. During tech a bow was also added to her hair to further underscore her youthfulness.



## The Chorus

McLaughlin describes the general identity of the Chorus as “the household help.”<sup>31</sup> There were extensive discussions with both designers and actors about what this phrase meant practically in our production. We were all adamant that the Chorus’ appearance reflect a lower-class status. However, we did not want them to have the appearance of slaves nor the appearance of refined butlers or housekeepers. We sought to identify a middle ground—the Chorus appearing as lower-class wage workers, ready to scrub a dirty floor or mend a broken stool, but also presentable enough to stand before the king and queen at a moment’s notice. Their costuming also needed to clearly indicate their individual personalities and responsibilities—some reflecting their youth, their sense of superiority, or their nursemaid duties. For example, Chorus H is costumed in a button down vest to indicate his imperious attitude; Chorus A wears a heavier jacket to indicate his nocturnal watchkeeping duties; and Chorus F and G wear aprons that indicate their roles as kindly nursemaids to Orestes and Electra respectively. The color palette and fabric choices for

---

<sup>31</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 2.

the chorus were intentionally chosen to help them blend into their surrounding so that they were always present, yet overlooked. For the Chorus' appearance as the Furies at the end of Act II, Jenni had originally designed crowns constructed from bird bones with veils of loosely woven black fabric draped over them. As the production's overall concept progressed, I felt less certain that this choice served the spine of the show and the practical necessities of the transition between Act II and Act III. These veils eventually transformed into oversized black rags which the Chorus members carried for this scene. These rags were intended to serve as transfigured versions of the white rags the Chorus carry throughout the play, and ultimately became a device we used to create the sensation of flapping wings as the actors arrive onstage for this moment.



## Sound Design

As pre-production began, I was eager to explore the role of sound in the world of *The Oresteia*. I learned quite a bit from my experience last season directing *Photograph 51* about how to more effectively integrate sound into a production process. Though I had plans for limited diegetic sound cues for *Photograph 51*, I initially resisted the inclusion of any incidental music in that production because I feared that its use would overly sentimentalize what I believed to be a sensitive exploration of a rather clinical character. Even though I overcame this resistance during that process, the final production of *Photograph 51* still employed music and

sound sparingly. The sound cues were unfortunately introduced into the *Photograph 51* rehearsal room very late into the process, giving the actors and I less time to appreciate how they might affect rhythm and the emotional qualities of the performances. For *The Oresteia*, I eagerly anticipated implementing the lessons I had learned during *Photograph 51* to more expeditiously investigate ways of supporting the story and performances through sound.

During Autumn 2022, I began meeting with the production's two student sound designers Alex Parr and Taylor Freeman, and the School of Drama's Sound Technician, MuTTT, to discuss the spine of the play and the importance of the sound design in crafting the overall mood and rhythm of the production. Though these designers joined our process later than anticipated, they were galvanized by the show's vision and early scenic and costume design work. We agreed that soundscape of *The Oresteia* would preserve the dark and ominous tone being cultivated by the other design areas. Alex, Taylor and I discussed weaving together a sonic tapestry of rich tonal hums, quotidian household sounds, and abstracted/manipulated recordings such as cracking glaciers and human breaths to capture a sense of horror and dread and the heart of the play. After these initial conversations, we set-up a collaborative Spotify playlist to which we added music that we each felt was thematically, instrumentally, or sonically relevant. In a separate Google document, the sound designers and I made notes about our impressions of each track and identified individual aural elements that resonated with the world of *The Oresteia*. This research playlist included work from Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross, William Basinski, Amon Tobin, Thom Yorke, and Jóhann Jóhannsson, all of whom served as inspiration for our production's final soundscape.

Each time I read through the text it became clearer and clearer to me that the designers would need to establish clear sonic vocabularies and motifs in order to craft thematic through-lines for the show's sound design. When revisiting the play with this structure in mind, several vocabularies were evident:

- Incidental sounds—night animals, doors closing, etc.
- Sounds that supported shifts in time (in conjunction with lighting cues) such as the flashbacks/transitions

- Chorus ‘Odes’
- Subjective character experiences—Furies, fabric blood (Iphigenia’s murder)
- Ghostly Apparitions—Iphigenia, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra’s ghosts
- Apollo Motifs—Cassandra’s visions, Orestes’ vocal possession

After identifying both the feel of the overall soundscape and these specific motifs, Alex and Taylor began developing cue drafts for the show. Even in their preliminary form, I invited them to attend rehearsals to play these cues so that they could better understand how the sound would function within the context of the scenes. They started by crafting an underlying rhythm which was intended to recur whenever the Chorus were engaged in one of their poetic speeches. To create this cue, Alex and Taylor utilized the rhythms of common household cleaning items such as water dripping into buckets, brushes sweeping across floors, and clothes dryers humming to create a pulse for the domestic life and work of the house. At an early rehearsal, we tested several drafts of the Chorus cue but quickly concluded that in each of them, the sounds were too dense. The cues were subsequently pared down, and the finalized cue was utilized several times throughout the show as a way to support and underscore not only the Chorus’ action, but their anxiety and strife. Similar explorations were conducted for each of the Apollo motifs, and for the ghostly apparitions. Though we wanted to craft a unified vocabulary, the designers and I were also adamant that there be an evolution of the sound from each of these occurrences to the next. For example, with the ghostly apparitions, Alex and Taylor advocated for the use of manipulated human breath as the underlying sonic motif as a way to thematically tie each ghost to the generations of specters that haunt the House of Atreus. However, since each specter serves its own narrative function, Alex and Taylor opted for a unique quality of breath in order to set them apart from previous apparitions. Similarly, for the Apollo motif the designers warped sounds of wind to hint at the sense of divine presence. While this sound accompanies both Cassandra and Orestes, the altered wind sounds also manifest differently for each character since their experience with the god is distinct.

These early sound sketches saved us quite a bit of time during tech as we had more opportunities to iterate the cues, and for the actors to grasp how the sound might inform their performances. It was particularly helpful for Iveliz as Cassandra when working to discover the

rhythm and variations within her Apollo visions. However, I wish I had pushed for even more cue drafts earlier on in the rehearsal process. Staging several of the large subjective character experience moments, such as the Furies' arrival or Iphigenia's murder, with even preliminary drafts of those cues during our rehearsals in Hutchinson Hall, would have better served both our creative and technical processes. However, we learned a significant amount about the progression of sound throughout the play through the early explorations we did conduct. Similar to lighting design, the earlier sections of the show are sonically expressionistic before the sounds become more and more sporadic by the play's end. This meant that there were very few sound cues in Act II, and virtually no sound cues in Act III. The only exceptions were once again the appearances of the ghosts of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and the arrival of the Furies. Since we ran behind schedule during tech due to some of the complicated set-ups, Alex, Taylor and I didn't have as much time to adjust the timing of some cues as much as we would've liked. However, I think that the overall the soundscape the designers crafted superbly supported the production's story and spine.

## **Section 3**

# **Rehearsal Process**

## Pre-Process

The pre-rehearsal process began in the summer of 2022. After spending a considerable amount of time reading and re-reading the script, I started brainstorming a spine for the production. When I began grad school identifying the spine of a piece was a difficult exercise, however I've noticed for my last few projects that I have been able to name the spines much earlier into the process. Once I determined that the spine for this production would be "to cleanse the house," I communicated this to the designers during our earliest meetings and then shared it with performers at the first rehearsal. I also swiftly began work on an event chart for the show as I knew that tracking and relaying the 'events' was going to be extremely important for this rehearsal process given the size and length of the show. I also spent quite a bit of time conducting research which included reading several different translations of Aeschylus' trilogy; reading about ancient Athenian society and theatrical practices; and researching the sources of inspiration for McLaughlin's adaptation. The show's dramaturg Catherine Heiner also proved instrumental at this stage of the process and she and I discussed what research and information would be most helpful for the actors as they shaped and deepened their performances. We knew that an understanding of the play's dramatic timeline, its mythology, and its thematic resonances would be necessary in order for both actors and audiences to invest in the play's world and spine. Early on, Catherine and I shared a lot of resources and then worked to narrow their scope down to the sources found in this paper and on the show's dramaturgy website.

Casting this show was somewhat more complicated than I initially anticipated when it came to finding School of Drama undergraduate students and community guest artists. With such a large cast size, I knew it would be necessary for me to cast PATP, undergraduate, and community guest artists, especially because I wanted to ensure that the world of the show felt diverse and varied. Once initial PATP casting was completed in November 2022, I still had six roles to fill—five Chorus roles, and the role of Iphigenia. Due to some departmental administrative issues, an open call for these roles was posted later than I had hoped, which put the casting process behind schedule. It quickly became clear that due to University policies, casting an actor younger than eighteen for Iphigenia would not be logistically possible, so I was fortunate to find Karis Ho, an undergraduate student who could feasibly play an adolescent

onstage. The other challenge was finding two older female actresses for Chorus F and G. Fellow PDTP Kate Drummond connected me with two Seattle-based community guest artists, Paula Wilson Nitka and Michelle Conklin, who were wonderful additions to this cast. Paula and Michelle are incredibly diligent actors and brought a sense of maturity, rigor, and creative generosity to the rehearsal space. Another community guest artist, Zack Chaykin, along with two undergraduate students, Natalie Tassielli and Ryan Hawkins, were also added to the Chorus. Having such a diverse group within the rehearsal room created a thoughtful and dynamic atmosphere and our conversations about the show's themes were lively and insightful. With such a diverse group, one of the ongoing goals and challenges, was working to identify the shifting interpersonal dynamics in the room and setting forth clear guidelines for expected behaviors in the rehearsal space.

Additionally, in the weeks leading up to rehearsals, I struggled to receive clear, transparent communication from the Production Office about the creation of the rehearsal schedule and the onboarding of the show's professional stage manager Nina Williams-Teramachi. I notified the Production Office in November that I would like to schedule rehearsals five days per week rather than six days per week, and have our rehearsals begin five days earlier than originally planned to account for what would otherwise be lost rehearsal time. Though I was told in November that this would not be possible due to Nina's contract, I discovered later that this proposed timeline was not broached with Nina until mid-December. While I do think it was helpful to have had time at the top of the quarter for pre-show preparation before rehearsals began, it would have been equally helpful to have an additional day off each week to allow for more actor prep. Unfortunately, I felt that there was little transparency around these communications and in my opinion, Nina was not adequately supported by the School of Drama either during their onboarding and contracting, or during the actual production process itself. I am very grateful for Nina's work on this production—they kept rehearsals and tech on track; worked with me to check-in with actors about rehearsal room dynamics; and maintained an atmosphere of professionalism and efficiency in every rehearsal and performance space. I hope that the School of Drama continues to hire professional stage managers like Nina so that future PDTP directors and PATP actors can have the experience of working and connecting with more

professional artists within the Seattle community and learning from their experience and expertise.

## **Week 1 - Table Work & Staging**

Day 1: Table Read & Design Presentations

Day 2: Actor Discussions & Act I Table Work

Day 3: Act 1 & Act II Table Work

Day 4: Act III Table Work & Character Conferences

Day 5: Staging (Act I) & Chorus Work

Day 6: Staging (Act I)

Most of the first week's rehearsals were spent at the table working through the script systematically 'event' to 'event.' On the first day it was important for me to set forth the spine of the show, establish the world of the play with design presentations, conduct the first reading, and then release the cast and crew. I concur with director William Ball when he says in his book *A Sense of Direction*, "It is my intention as the director to make the first reading an eventless situation. I don't want anything interesting to happen at the first reading."<sup>32</sup> I reminded the actors that the first reading is an opportunity simply to listen to the play, rather than to perform. It was thrilling to hear McLaughlin's text come to life; to finally hear the cast speak the text aloud; and to more fully grasp the cadences and rhythmic shifts of the text which I had hitherto been unable to fully absorb while reading it on my own. Before the first reading began, I encouraged the actors to write down questions about their characters and the given circumstances, and to note how they understood their character's relationship to cleaning or cleansing throughout the play.

When we arrived for the second day, I spent some time outlining our goals for table work. These included gaining a clearer understanding of the dramatic action by identifying 'events' (a term I defined for the group); gaining a clearer understanding of the given circumstances; and creating a space for us to identify how we might turn any ideas we discuss into playable action. I asked the actors to partner off in order to discuss their observations about

---

<sup>32</sup> Ball, William. *A Sense of Direction*. Hollywood, Quite Specific Media Group Ltd., 1984. 101.

each character's relationship to the spine, and to highlight any significant questions that arose as part of their discussion. When they returned to the table, we spent some time talking through each group's observations and questions, and unpacking or pinpointing queries that would be revisited later as we began a second read-through of the text. The show's dramaturg, Catherine Heiner, also directed actors to *The Oresteia's* dramaturgy website and explained how to use this resource. We began another reading Act I, pausing to identify and name the 'events,' and discussing any significant questions or notes of interest. Though the actors were tentative to speak up at first, the deeper we dove into the text, the more incisive and insightful their questions and observations became. The next two days continued in a similar fashion, with the cast continuing to identify 'events' and discussing character beats and significant given circumstances. At the end of rehearsal on Wednesday I gave the actors the assignment of finishing the phrase "I am..." for their character with three to four simple adjectives (with a reminder not to flatten any apparent contradictions they might discover). The next day I started some early character conferences with Emily, Jarron, Esther, Nic, and Iveliz. I wanted to ensure we began this process with alignment on our approach to these characters. I spent about twenty minutes with each actor listening to their "I am..." descriptors and discovering how those might provide insight to their character's motivations. Some of the actors had clearly been thinking about their characters deeply while others had just begun to scratch the surface. I suggested they all conduct a deep-dive into the text over the weekend to strengthen their analysis (for example, I suggested Nic revisit Orestes' defense speech as I believe it reveals a lot about the character's super objective). All of them asked astute questions and it was clear that they were starting to think about how our table work conversations would inform the action and physical life of the play.

On Friday, after some initial staging for the very top of the show, I conducted a similar character conference with the entire Chorus. We had a robust conversation about their function within the story and about their arc over the course of McLaughlin's adaptation. We noted that the Chorus serves a more traditional Greek Chorus function in the first act, and then grows more and more individualized as the story progresses. We moved from this discussion into putting some of the Chorus text on its feet, working to identify the rhythm and feel of the words while maintaining an understanding of the story. The show's sound designers, Alex and Taylor,

attended this rehearsal to play some early drafts of their rhythmic Chorus cues. Playing these cues provided the actors with a sense of the tone for the text, and helped the designers make appropriate adjustments to the cues. On Saturday, we jumped back into staging Act I. This was the first time that I recognized some visible tension between some members of the cast which was noticeably affecting the energy in the room. Though this did not impact the amount of work we were able to accomplish on this day, it did indicate to the stage manager and I that this friction would likely be an obstacle moving forward.

## **Week 2 – Staging**

Day 1: Holiday (Martin Luther King Jr. Day)

Day 2: Staging (Act I)

Day 3: Staging (Act I)

Day 4: Staging (Act I)

Day 5: Run-through Act I & Notes

Day 6: Staging (Act II)

During Week 2, we finished staging Act I before conducting what I decided to call a “put-together” of the whole act on Friday. It was very helpful to see the whole act performed without stopping at such an early stage. This helped me gain a better perspective on what was and was not working, and helped the actors gain a better sense of the arc of the action. Before we began the “put-together,” I reminded the actors that it was an opportunity to learn more about the structure, rhythm, and flow of the show. During our notes session, we then took some time to reflect on what we had each learned, and how we hoped to apply these lessons towards future rehearsals. The most consistent lessons identified by the actors for Act I were a greater appreciation of the stamina required to sustain the drive of the act, and the need for deeper specificity in their choices.

During the “put-together” I was particularly interested in gauging how the Chorus functioned within the first act since I was uncertain whether I had over-choreographed them or provided them with too little structure or onstage business. Though we had begun staging each

Chorus scene by naming their objectives and actions, the “put-together” clearly indicated that there was still confusion amongst the Chorus about their intentions. Some of this confusion was due to a lack of clarity from me as the director about the Chorus’ overall role and function within the story, while some I knew would be resolved by actors conducting deeper, individual character explorations. Realizing that more textual investigative work was needed, I opted to carve out some time during our Saturday rehearsal to read through each Chorus section in Act I again and conduct a second round of table work to further clarify the overall objective and tone of each choral piece. One of the Chorus’ main struggles was the tension between their work as individual actors to craft distinct, personal characters, while also being a member of a collective unit. This additional table work time proved instrumental in developing the actor’s grasp the text, and ensuring that even if audience members didn’t catch every word of Chorus dialogue, that they would understand the mood and intention of their speeches.

### **Week 3 – Staging**

Day 1: Staging (Act II)

Day 2: Set Visit & Staging (Act II)

Day 3: Run-through Act I & Act II & Notes

Day 4: Staging (Act III)

Day 5: Staging (Act III)

Day 6: Run-through Act II & Act III & Notes

On Tuesday, the School of Drama’s Technical Director Alex Danilchik gave us access to the scenic shop so that the actors would have a chance to walk on the deck and the raked platform before tech. This was an extremely helpful trip and provoked fruitful staging questions and considerations from the actors once we were back in the rehearsal room utilizing our taped-out ground plan in Hutchinson Hall. The shop visit also provided Emily with the opportunity to practice lifting the stone block for the grave reveal at the end of Act I, and for the Chorus to practice blood throw at the end of Act II. The properties designer, Andrea Bush, prepared enough stage blood for the actors to have three practice throws during this session. As we discovered in our initial shop tests, it took several attempts for the actors to gain a better sense of aim given the

viscosity of the liquid in their buckets. On each throw, their aim became more accurate and more the blood covered the mannequin stand-in. Since we staged this moment on the actual deck, I also had the chance to more accurately space the actors and check the angles to hopefully ensure that none of the blood would be thrown onto any other actor or audience member. This test taught both cast and crew much more about how the blood functions when thrown, where it will run onstage, and provided us with some valuable data about how to refine the staging of this moment. Though this shop visit expended some of our rehearsal time on Tuesday, the feedback I received from everyone was that it was extremely helpful, and my hope is that it saves us some time re-spacing during tech.

Staging and running Act II was fairly smooth with the exception of the ending as we struggled to figure out how to accomplish aspects of the transition between Act II and III, including carrying Clytemnestra's body offstage without a blackout. Our "put-together" of Act I and II on Wednesday was more muddled than I had hoped, particularly because I had not had time work the notes from Act I before running the act again. While this "put together" was discouraging, it reinforced my instinct to create more rehearsal time for the Act I Chorus sections. On Thursday we began staging the top of Act III through the exit of Clytemnestra's ghost, but then I released everyone except the Chorus in order to revisit Act I. I had initially been very resistant to the idea of the Chorus speaking directly to the audience during their choral speeches in Act I, but during Wednesday's "put together," I realized that there are other moments when the characters speak directly to the audience and that this rule I had imposed on the Chorus actors was arbitrary and inconsistent. I asked the actors to perform the first choral section of the play while also speaking directly to the stage managers and myself. As soon as they began this exploration, it was though a weight had been lifted off of them—their voices were more lively, their targets more specific, and their intentions clearer. I tried another experiment where I asked them to see if they could replicate that sensation but direct the dialogue back to each other, but it was almost instantly evident that this was not as strong of a choice—it noticeably shrunk their voices and constricted their movement. We then rehearsed several other choral sections of Act I, each time investigating when the Chorus was speaking directly to the audience or to one another. In some sections we discovered that it was a combination, but that as the act progressed, they grew more and more focused on one another

rather than the external audience targets. We noted that a similar progression happens in Act II into Act III—that the Chorus begins by directly addressing the audience and ends by predominantly addressing one another.

We then spent time staging the end of Act III. After our Chorus work the night before, I wanted to give the Chorus actors another opportunity to really play and explore. I provided several staging touchpoints for ‘events’ in Act III, but then I asked them to do an anarchist run of the last fifteen pages of the act. We did several rounds of this—each time they would explore the shape of the scene, I would take copious notes, and then I would give a few thoughts and strategize with them before their next iteration. The staging became clearer and clearer each time as the actors grew more familiar with the text, their individual characters’ perspectives, and the arc of the act. While I did need to subsequently provide specific staging for several moments, we predominantly staged this act based on the actor’s initial anarchist runs.

#### **Week 4 – Staging**

Day 1: Full Run-through

Day 2: Work Notes

Day 3: Work Notes

Day 4: Work Notes

Day 5: Full Run-through

Day 6: No Rehearsal

After our first full show run-through on Monday, it became clear that we would not be able to deepen or clarify choices until the actors were fully off-book. It was difficult to continue honing the work with several cast members absent throughout the week due to physical illness and mental health concerns. Despite these set-backs, we persisted in working through our notes act by act which led us to another full run-through on Friday. From a directorial point of view, it was extremely helpful to see two full run-throughs in the same week to really grasp how our work throughout the week had improved the overall show, and to identify where specific moments weren’t consistently working. Our work notes days were mostly spent restaging

moments, revisiting given circumstances to see how we could enliven the stakes of specific scenes, and creating space for the actors to rehearse sections of text that required deep listening. Several of these explorations, though helpful to try, led us right back to where we had begun. For example, we had developed a kind of cat-and-mouse chase between Clytemnestra and Electra at the height of their argument at the beginning of Act II. However, each time the actors ran the scene, they struggled with timing the movement to the text. We temporarily set aside our previous choices and tried several other staging options, but each time the actors concluded that nothing made quite as much sense as what we had done originally. I then urged them to attempt the original version without waiting for their scene partner's lines in order to heighten the stakes and drive the momentum of the scene. We concluded at the end of this experiment that this was the most effective version of the scene both for the actors and for the audience. I also created space during Thursday's schedule to allow the Chorus to run-through Act III numerous times. While there was still more work to be done on this section, deeper questions emerged and more successful experiments were conducted each time I let the scene run. I also struggled with the ending of the play during this week's rehearsals—I had staged some unified movement for the Chorus, but this sense of unification seemed to imply a singular decision or even acquittal of Orestes. Though exoneration may have been part of Aeschylus' original ending, I do not think McLaughlin's conclusion is so clear-cut. I felt that the ending should align more with the spirit of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission—the Chorus should create a space of truth telling and reconciliatory action separate from the punishment or retribution that may come afterwards. Watching it again, I realized the importance of Orestes' apology in breaking the cycle of vengeance, and I planned to spend some time the following week restaging this moment to highlight the tension within the Chorus, and the significance of Orestes' appeal for forgiveness.

Given some of the thorny interpersonal dynamics that emerged between the actors over the course of the week, it was helpful to have had an extra day off at this particular stage in the rehearsal process. I was excited to return to the play on Monday with fresh eyes and begin work again with a cast who had a renewed sense of energy and some extra time to rest and work on the text independently.

## **Week 5 – Staging & Tech Rehearsal**

Day 1: Work Notes

Day 2: Work Notes

Day 3: Full Run-through

Day 4: Work Notes

Day 5: Light-Over/Spacing Rehearsal

Day 6: Tech Rehearsal

The beginning of the week was spent working notes from the previous Friday's run-through. These work days were extremely productive in cultivating a greater sense of urgency and vitality necessary for the production. For Wednesday's run-through, I invited Professor Kelly Kitchens to attend. It was immensely helpful to have an outside perspective on the work and to gain a better sense of how some of the moments were landing on an audience less familiar with the material. Based on my own notes from the previous week's run and some feedback from Kelly, I knew that I still needed to make some significant adjustments to the end of the play, especially re-staging the hand washing sequence. I had previously gathered the Chorus into a 'jury' configuration for Orestes' defense but as mentioned before, this erroneously suggested a unified judgment or even acquittal. I opted instead to have the Chorus hear Orestes' defense from wherever they were onstage at the start of his speech—conveying that they were judging his predicament from their own unique perspectives. We also tested several iterations where post-defense, the Chorus formed a group to collectively witness the hand washing. However, each time we tried this, it again gave the impression that the Chorus had come to a unanimous consensus about Orestes' fate, and in one iteration had even rejected his apology. I also originally staged this moment with Chorus F & G leading Orestes and Electra over to the grave to wash their hands there. This choice was supported by McLaughlin's stage directions which indicate that the Chorus can lead Electra and Orestes to the buckets for the cleansing. After watching several versions, I realized that to really land this moment, the Chorus members needed to meet Electra and Orestes where they are and begin the cleansing process there. The sequence also needed a less ceremonial tone. To this end, I reminded the actors of another of McLaughlin's stage directions: "it's done without drama, it's the sense of a preoccupied mother

tending to a child in an ordinary way.”<sup>33</sup> Once these adjustments were made, the scene began to work and resonate in a way that it had not before—it became more straightforward, direct, and truthful.

The energy was particularly low during rehearsals over the course of this week as many of the graduate student actors were increasingly distracted by burnout or solo show preparations. However, this quickly changed when everyone was allowed onto the set for the first time during Friday’s light-over/spacing rehearsal. I think that the actors were re-energized by the scenic design taking shape around them and all the new possibilities and nuances this opened up for them. Though we did not complete a full run-through during Friday’s light-over, this time was immensely valuable and set us up well to begin Act I tech the next day. I anticipated having to re-stage more moments once we were on the set, but the time we spent visiting the shop earlier in the process and my own sense of compositional awareness throughout the rehearsal process served us well.

---

<sup>33</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 84.

## **Section 4**

# **Post Production Reflections**

Despite the many challenges and unforeseen setbacks throughout this production process, I am incredibly proud of the work the team for *The Oresteia* has done. It is still difficult only days after the show has closed to fully reflect on the experience, but my hope is to as clearly as I can, and without qualifying the results, discuss the outcomes of the production. With the loss of the costume designer, the strained interpersonal dynamics amongst the PATP cohorts, and the continued struggle with the effects of COVID-19 upon our production, this has not been the easiest process either technically or creatively. However, I definitely feel that I have grown both as a director and leader, and I look forward to applying the lessons I have learned to future creative endeavors with a renewed sense of patience and grace.

Upon entering the theatre, one is immediately struck by the scenic design—an uneasy feeling washes over you as you are faced with the towering façade of the house; the imperiously large, obsidian doors; and the implied violence of the immense fissure rupturing the floor. The sound and lighting design support this sense of disquiet with eerie atmospheric tones drifting through the space; deep shadows enveloping the environment; and a blanket of haze obscuring our view of the dimly-lit, tempestuous sky. Each of these elements were successfully employed to incisively establish the mood and tone of the play. I was particularly struck by a line from the UW Daily’s feature on the production: “No one in this play is good nor bad. Nothing is black or white. Instead, *The Oresteia* dabbles in the gray, showcasing that we can break the endless cycles of violence and vengeance.”<sup>34</sup> Though perhaps not explicitly intended by our design team, this reference to living in a world enveloped in shades of grey rather than stark black and white, supported our design choice of a greyscale world for this production—the colors not only indicating that this is a bleak, dingy world, but also one of profound moral ambiguity. From audience feedback I received, the thematic resonances and the spine of the play were evident in the design and performances. At one performance as the gravestones arrived onstage during intermission, I overheard an audience member ponder whether the additional boulders could adequately mask the growing crack in the house’s foundation or the bodies that lay festering beneath. They wondered aloud how the household staff could ever clean up such a mess. It was

---

<sup>34</sup> Vespas, Dominique. “UW drama’s adaptation of ‘The Oresteia’ explores questions behind justice and humanity.” UW Daily [University of Washington, Seattle], March 3, 2023. <https://t.ly/IcBT>

gratifying to hear this question articulated, as this inquiry was ultimately at the heart of the production.

Though many of the costumes were completed as designed, it would have been helpful to have had more time with the costume team to further realize and refine some of the pivots that occurred late into the process. Some of these changes occurred due to miscommunications as a result of the transfer of roles and responsibilities, as occurred between Jenni and Ricky. Others happened because Ricky lacked full familiarity with the script for much of the process and so the costumes evolved alongside his grasp of the play. While these particular issues were resolved through run-throughs and more in-depth communications, there were other occurrences not as easily resolved. Due to several considerable setbacks for the shop including misplacing patterns; growing increasingly behind schedule during build; and difficulty arranging fittings; some of the pieces Ricky and I discussed building from scratch arrived at tech either improvised, or pulled from stock. While these adjustments were appropriate given the circumstances, it was not ideal for me to learn about these modifications for the first time at such a late stage. With Ricky's absence at tech, it was difficult to know what information had been communicated to the rest of the team and in retrospect it would have been prudent to have had an all-team costume meeting prior to the start of tech week. Since no such conference occurred, I often found myself repeating questions I'd expressed to Ricky weeks prior that had not been addressed. Despite the concern I voiced early on in the process that the royal family might blend into the background, this unfortunately occurred. For example, Clytemnestra's dress when she welcomes Agamemnon home, was cut from material the shop already had on hand, even though it did not have the luster originally intended for this costume and consequently lacked the ostentation the moment necessitated. An-lin and I discussed several adjustments to elevate the opulence of the costume, including the addition of a cape, a sparkling necklace, and a livery collar. An-lin and the rest of the costume team did incredible work making swift pivots throughout the tech process to bring the costumes into greater and greater alignment with the show's intended vision. Notwithstanding these complications, it was a delight to see the actors find surer footing for their characters once they were in costume, and to see the ways their attire provided greater cohesion and authenticity to the world of the play.

Each of the performers worked earnestly to bring their characters to life. Emily's performance as Clytemnestra was powerful, and though she sometimes struggled to maintain consistent targeting and grounded connection to her scene partners, her work provided the show with an emotional center around which everything else orbited. McLaughlin has included several monumental speeches for Clytemnestra throughout the play—each one is rich in poetry, and immense in emotion. While she attacked each one with fierceness and insight, Emily would occasionally get lost in these sections of text, substituting drive for rumination. Though she does not appear until Act II, Esther's Electra brought an incisiveness to the show. As a performer, Esther's listening was active and her targets were clear. Though their energy wavered from performance to performance, when Emily and Esther were focused and coordinated, the confrontation scene between Clytemnestra and Electra was electric and drew audible reactions from audiences.

Jarron brought a charismatic sense of religious fervor to Agamemnon. He has a tendency to overcomplicate character intentions, which can make his actions unclear, but despite the COVID-19 masking necessary during the second weekend, the clarity of his performance grew over the course of the run. The first scene between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon suffered because the performers were unable to fully connect emotionally and rhythmically, and so I did not completely accept the stakes of their rocky marriage and haunted child. However, when Agamemnon returns from Troy, Jarron fully captured the immense power and insecurity at the heart of his character, allowing a fully-realized portrait of this hubristic man to come into focus. Karis' Iphigenia evolved markedly throughout the process. Karis initially approached the character as a petulant teen striving for attention, but as rehearsals progressed, she crafted a lovely sense of innocence and humility in her portrayal. Nic brought a tortured melancholy to Orestes which beautifully served the character on his quest for true peace. Nic did struggle to fully commit with ferocity to the dramatic crisis his character, and as a result, his performance tended toward a reserved, internalized quality. With Iveliz, the opposite was true and it took some time to calibrate her performance. Her initial physical impulses were unbridled, which consequently overwhelmed the lucidity of the text. The more that Iveliz and I talked about tapping into her Suzuki training, specifically using statues as a way to generate a controlled

captivity within the visions, the more she was able to shift between the complex emotional shades necessary for the role.

Though the Chorus struggled to initially find their footing, the evolution into the fullness of their individual characters grew stronger and stronger. On the final day of tech, I started seeing the application of many of the notes I'd given throughout the process about the Chorus' connectivity and drive. As a result, the Chorus scenes began to feel more intentional and dynamic. Though my hope was that as the run continued they would have more and more opportunities to embrace this impulse with curiosity and tenacity, they were unfortunately hampered during the second weekend by the required KN95 masks, which robbed them of much of their precision and potency. In early rehearsals, each Chorus member began to identify their individualized Chorus personalities. While these personalities take clearer shapes in Act III, they are plainly present throughout the entire text. Several performers, particularly Michelle and Natalie, crafted clear spines for their roles that were consistent and distinct from beginning of the play until the end. From the start of the process the Chorus performers grappled with the immense amount of listening and reacting which Act I required, and consequently the levels of clarity and energy during the Act I speeches varied throughout run-throughs and performances. Though I strategized various ways of approaching this issue including re-staging these scenes several weeks into rehearsals to include added stage business, I would've loved more time to investigate this question and offer additional tactics. However, this process revealed to me the need to continue working to transform my notes into more actionable language in order to continue crafting stimulating and unified productions.

Over the course of the rehearsal process, the actors and I discovered that in Act I, due to its mythic scope, it was more difficult for them to ground their performances. The act often had a tendency, if the actors were not careful to play their targets and intentions with rigor and precision, to feel either mechanical and perfunctory, or even overwrought. It took a considerable amount of time for the actors to get comfortable enough with the text to really begin to live and breathe into the given circumstances of the play and even then, their capacity to do so would vary from night to night. Some of this might simply be one of the risks of presenting classic Greek tragedies, as I learned from several of the actors that the poetic quality of the language and

the conventions of ancient Greek drama were difficult for them to connect to as a contemporary theatre practitioners. Despite my incredulity at this pronouncement, the actors would often fall into one of the common traps of classic texts—making every line of text as important as the last, resulting in an extremely histrionic style of speech. In retrospect, some of these difficulties could perhaps have been mitigated by spending more time exploring some of the conventions of Greek texts in depth to discover fresh ways for modern performers to tap into them. For example, I would be curious to see what would've happened if we explored the Chorus through the lens of lawyers or sports commentators in order to find a relatable embodiment of the analytic function Choruses serve in Greek drama. Though we were able to deepen the actor's grasp of the Chorus' action later in our process, I do think more exploratory work, particularly up front, could have eliminated some of the resistance to, and difficulty with, the material. Given the time constraints and size of the play, we did not have as much time as I believe would have been advantageous during the process to explore the text's complex rhythms. However, moving forward into my career, I intend to be more intentional about balancing time constraints with my desire for more exploratory rehearsals to discover ways of more expeditiously utilizing my time.

One of the biggest challenges I faced throughout this production was learning to trust my instincts particularly in moments of uncertainty. I have been encouraged during my time in graduate school to put shows on their feet by staging them as quickly as possible in order to capture the overall structure, and create room for everyone to deepen and refine the work during subsequent days and weeks. Despite the obvious advantages of this strategy, I am not yet fully accustomed to this accelerated process, and have found it difficult to break some of my previously-held creative habits. In the past, I have had a tendency to dive in too deeply during the early stages of a process, sometimes becoming stuck on minute details which prevent me from evaluating the overall progress of the work. During *The Oresteia*, I struggled with the discomfort of being in the “messy” middle of the process. This occurred particularly between the initial “put-together” of Act I and the next opportunity to work notes from Act I, which was after an additional “put-together” of Acts I and II. I was anxious to delay work notes for Act I because I didn't want to reinforce choices that weren't serving the show. However, I quickly realized that I was operating from a place of fear, and needed to let go of this anxiety to embrace the messiness of the current moment—knowing that there would more opportunities to clean up

those moments later. I had to remind myself that the work was still in process, and that I should resist the urge to rush through my discomfort to artificially polish a moment that simply needed more time to develop. My mantra throughout this production has been “It’s OK for the work to be messy right now—we will figure it out.” And we did—since I opted to stage as quickly as possible, we were able to hold three full run-throughs before tech started which created more opportunities for the actors to fully embody their characters, and learn more about the world of the play through repeated experience, which only served to deepen and improve their work.

One of the goals I established at the outset of this thesis project was to embrace more poetic, operatic gestures in my directorial work. As I mentioned previously, I have a tendency to gravitate towards strict realism, often avoiding lyrical gestures in favor of tightly controlled compositions. I had several opportunities throughout this production to push myself out of my comfort zone and work towards this objective. One particular moment for which I was excited, but was also unsure would succeed, was the fabric blood kabuki drop during Iphigenia’s murder in Act I. This moment was one of the more significant expressionistic gestures within the show. This moment thrilled me when reading it on the page, but I was anxious about whether the emotional truth of the event and its storytelling beats could coexist and clearly resonate with the audience. Since we’d been unable to fully test the timing and picturization of this moment prior to tech, it was unclear how the moment would function technically and artistically. While I would’ve loved more time to tweak the timing, the execution of this moment within the production successfully pushed me beyond the bounds of realism and encouraged me to continue discovering other moments throughout the show to embrace the poetic qualities in McLaughlin’s writing.

In addition to the kabuki drop in Act I, I was concerned from the outset about how best to execute the moments of liquid stage blood within the show. In Act I, the blood is primarily metaphoric, represented by swaths of red fabric that reappear throughout the act—falling from the roof of the house; wrapped around a character’s hands and throat; or encased around dead bodies. However, in Acts II and III, the blood is ‘real’ as it is literally thrown or poured onto the characters. From the start of this process, I have posited that the difference in the blood’s appearance was a reflection of the progression of time and memory. Since a large portion of Act

I takes place in the characters' memories of Mycenae prior to Iphigenia's murder, it therefore made sense for there to be a greater distance or detachment from the reality of the blood itself—hence its dreamlike manifestations as fabric. In Act II though, the Chorus begins the act by noting that they live in a nightmare from which they cannot seem to awake, except when they “lurch into now.”<sup>35</sup> This pronounced sense of ‘present-ness’ in Act II supports the appearance of ‘real’ blood when Orestes murders Clytemnestra since it brings a visceral reality to his abhorrent act of violence.

The practicalities of the stage blood required extensive experimentation to evaluate how it would wash from the costumes and how it might impact the scenic elements. For its sudden appearance, McLaughlin describes the action in the script as follows: “[Orestes] is suddenly aware of the chorus around him. The Chorus throw the contents of the buckets, blood, at Orestes. He falls to his knees on the grave, drenched.”<sup>36</sup> Since the production was in the relatively intimate space of the Jones Playhouse, it was important to consider the relationship of any liquid to audience members and so the moment was initially staged to have all of the blood thrown upstage. To evaluate the trajectory of the blood when thrown, we then conducted several exploratory tests, first using water, and then the proposed blood mixture. We felt confident heading into tech that this moment would work, though we had only had the opportunity to test it once with the actors before arriving on the finished set.

Prior to this production, I've only had the opportunity to work once before on a show that involved the use of liquid stage blood. That show's extremely limited scenic and costume budgets did not allow us to make the kind of operatic explosion of blood which that play required. During this production, I'd hoped to accomplish a more ambitious gesture, however we were hampered by the constraints of the physical space which ultimately did not allow us to throw the blood in a way that would have created the visceral impact that we'd hoped to achieve. With the way I had originally staged the blood throw, it was extremely difficult for the performers to control where the liquid would land, and Orestes would often emerge from this moment unscathed while the scrim and other scenic elements would be thoroughly stained. Due

---

<sup>35</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 41.

<sup>36</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 65.

to the extensive clean-up required each time we ran this sequence, I didn't have many opportunities to see this moment in context and evaluate whether it was having its desired effect. Late into the process I realized that the moment wasn't working. So, I went back to step one to ask myself what the effect of this moment should be. I quickly realized that I was most interested in a sense of surprise, shame, and violence, which was currently lacking in the physical gesture of the throw. Upon making this discovery, I chose to restage the moment during tech and instead have the actors dump the blood from their buckets onto Orestes—an act that felt more intimate, aggressive, and aligned with my initial impulse. Though the need to modify this moment necessitated discarding all of our previous plans, I discovered that this change made the scene clearer, made the actors more confident, and created a greater impact for audiences. I had to be open to change, even at that late stage, in order to better serve the work. I have a mentor who always used the phrase “hold your work tenderly but lightly”—reminding artists to care deeply for the work they do, but not to suffocate the process with an unwillingness to adapt to new circumstances or information. This production was another opportunity to apply this lesson, and it has ultimately made me a more adaptable, responsive, and perceptive director.

Several weeks ahead of performances, the School of Drama's Constituent Relations Officer, Hillary Long, approached me to inquire whether I would be interested in hosting an audience talkback with myself, the show's dramaturg Catherine Heiner, and Dr. Christopher Waldo from UW's Department of Classics. Before agreeing to participate in this event I was eager to ensure that the Department of Classics clearly understood that this production was a contemporary adaptation of Aeschylus' trilogy rather than simply a production of the original text. To my delight, the Department of Classics was enthusiastic about responding to this new adaptation and discussing the *Oresteia's* enduring relevance as it is revised and reimagined for new audiences. About a week before the event, the School of Drama's own Dr. Odai Johnson was added to the panel to moderate the conversation. About fifteen audience members attended the talkback and some of the cast stayed and participated, providing insights into their characters throughout the conversation. I discussed what had drawn me to the text and then Ms. Heiner and Dr. Waldo talked about their impressions of the production. I was particularly appreciative that Dr. Waldo mentioned Aeschylus' deeply patriarchal ending to *The Eumenides* and how McLaughlin subverts this masculine lens by highlighting both Clytemnestra's identity as a

mother and the abhorrence of Orestes' matricide. Dr. Johnson and Dr. Waldo both focused in on the play's ending, noting its differences from the classical text and praising the way in which the adaptation is far more accessible for modern audiences. Those in attendance seemed to agree and were engrossed by the subsequent discussion about grace, reconciliation, and amnesty.

Throughout the production process for *The Oresteia*, I have been surprised by laxity of the University of Washington's COVID-19 policies for live on-campus events. Given the large number of professional productions still being cancelled or otherwise curtailed by COVID-19 in 2022 and 2023, and my own experiences during the height of the Omnicron variant during UW's 2021-2022 season, I was adamant heading into this process that every precaution be taken to protect performers, crew, and the well-being of the show itself. However, I was initially told to by the production office that masks and testing were entirely voluntary for all personnel on campus and that our team was unable to request or require either testing or mask-wearing per University policy. However, once one of the cast members tested positive during tech, I discovered that requesting, though not requiring, masks was indeed a possibility and had been for some time—a clear shift in the policy which was originally communicated to me. It would have been helpful to have been informed of this change earlier in our process as it might have prevented some of the difficulty the production faced while in tech and performances. Additionally, the production faced difficulty with University COVID-19 policies when one of the actors, who suffered from a pre-existing condition which gave them one of the symptoms associated with COVID-19, was required to adhere to rigid COVID-19 testing protocols. Though everyone knew that this actor's symptoms were not caused by COVID-19, the University policies still caused them to miss several tech rehearsals and even one performance. It may be prudent for University administrators to review this policy and work to find solutions that continue to keep performers and crew safe while creating a more sustainable set of guidelines.

Though we had actors in the company understudying other roles in case of illness, I do not think I thoroughly considered how these understudy assignments might impact the timeline during the rehearsal process, or put-ins for the performances. Due to a COVID-19 exposure, we had to ask several actors to run their understudy tracks rather than their normal performance tracks during tech rehearsals, which created delays and additional hurdles for the other actors and

the costume team. Upon reflection it may have been wiser to audition more undergraduate students for the understudy roles, or to have raised more funds to cover additional guest artist understudy fees. COVID-19 also derailed our final weekend of performances with one actor out due to a COVID-19 exposure, one actor swinging into their understudy track, and an additional understudy performer stepping into the show. These final performances were also masked, which created difficulty for the actors in connecting with one another, as well as maintaining the level of energy needed for such a dynamic production. While I understand that the show needed to function differently under these circumstances, I do think that moving forward, the lax approach towards COVID-19 from UW and the School of Drama is currently unsustainable for productions. Stricter rules around testing and masking should remain requirements for productions, particularly during tech and performances, as is currently the case across much of the professional theatre world. I have learned much through directing during the pandemic—I have discovered again and again the importance of managing my own expectations; the importance of communal support and grief; and the importance of embracing uncertainty.

Finally, I struggled throughout this process to handle the ways an alleged act of sexual misconduct within the School of Drama community impacted our rehearsal room. Knowing that this incident and previous incidents of misconduct might raise concerns about graduate students' and community guest artists' interactions with undergraduate students, I clearly established at outset of this process my expectation that all production members behave professionally and respectfully. Our rehearsal room guidelines included an acknowledgment that the presence of undergraduate students, graduate students, and community guest artists impacted the power dynamics in the room; stated that any kind of harassment would not be tolerated; and reminded everyone that communication was key to creating a brave and safe rehearsal space. While no one in this production was directly involved in the alleged incident, it still cast a rather large shadow across the collaborative spirit of our work. One graduate student actor in particular struggled to work with other members of the program, and with the themes of the show—particularly the realities of existing in community with people accused of committing acts of violence. I reached out to Professor Adrienne Mackey and met with her a few times about an appropriate way of handling this cast member's concerns and the dynamics of the room which were growing icier by the day. I spoke directly with this cast member to see if we could facilitate a dialogue about the

process and the inter-personal interactions with production team members and individuals throughout the department.

Though this initial conversation did temporarily improve the rehearsal room dynamics, there were several other instances that occurred throughout our process that continued to inflame tensions between the graduate students. Though I spoke with faculty about these incidents, very little institutional support was provided to me in my capacity as both a member of the graduate student cohort and as director of this production. Though these incidents did not derail this project entirely, they did make the rehearsal room environment extremely stressful in ways that were detrimental to our creative and technical processes. There were several instances when certain characters would begin heated arguments but it was clear that the actors were no longer in control of their emotions and had begun to actually yell at one another. I pulled these actors aside and spoke with them about this disturbing trend, asking them to work with me to strategize ways to manage these reactions. While this was largely successful, there were several onstage interactions between characters that I ultimately think suffered because the actors were unable to meaningfully connect and communicate without these bitter feelings influencing their work. My hope is that the School of Drama can continue seeking transparent ways of intervening in similar circumstances in the future to deescalate and mediate potential conflicts before they reach this level of friction, and support student directors by providing counsel and tools to help manage these dynamics.

Looking back at my time in graduate school, I definitely see how much I have grown as a director and leader. I recently had an occasion to review my notes from the first in-person production I directed at UW in Autumn 2021, Paula Vogel's *The Baltimore Waltz*. Though I had a strong spine for that production, I don't think that I was able to translate it very well into playable action for the performers. This resulted in a production that had some exciting moments but had no clear sense of how to bring them together. The spine for this production of *The Oresteia* is very strong—it is direct, straightforward, and actionable. It is clear to me that my capacities and skills have grown significantly over the last year and a half, and by using this spine I was able to craft a more cohesive world for the production and give the performer's a clearer foundation upon which to build. During design conversations, tablework, and individual

rehearsals, I often found myself using the spine as a litmus test for aesthetic and performance choices, and employing it as a common vocabulary with which to communicate the reason behind those choices. Before coming to grad school, I often struggled to concisely articulate the overall visions for the productions I directed—overcomplicating my conceptual presentations with verbose language or vague explanations that did not provide collaborators with a direct, actionable framework. I look forward to applying this hard-won lesson to future projects with the same level of incisiveness I applied to this production.

*The Oresteia* has been both an incredibly difficult and an incredibly rewarding project. The questions it provokes about justice and communal care have resonated deeply for both this department and for the audiences who attended the show—more than I could’ve anticipated when I chose this show for my thesis in Spring 2022. However, I think that my work on this production has made me a braver artist, one who is not as afraid to grapple with these demanding creative processes or difficult thematic questions. I don’t think I’m alone in this—I’ve met multiple audience members who have told me that the production inspired challenging conversations beyond the walls of the theatre. When speaking to one audience member in particular, they referenced one of my favorite lines in the show: “Aren’t we better than our worst crimes? Are we just going to go on trading blood endlessly back and forth? What is the sense of that? Aren’t we tired?”<sup>37</sup> He said that he felt that same fatigue, but that the production had reinvigorated his desire to keep investigating his questions around justice and grace. And at the end of the day, that’s what I aim for as a director—that people walk away from the theatre I make with a renewed sense of curiosity, compassion, and hope.

---

<sup>37</sup> McLaughlin, Ellen. *The Oresteia*. 2019. Theatrical script. 77.

## **Section 5**

# **Production Photos**

All Photos by Kyler Martin







## **Section 6**

### **Research**

The following citations account for the major sources drawn upon in preparation for and throughout the rehearsal process for this play.

Select visual research can be found in Section 2.

## Selected Bibliography

Aeschylus. *Oresteia*. Translated by Richmond Lattimore, London, The University of Chicago Press, 1953.

Ball, William. *A Sense of Direction*. Hollywood, Quite Specific Media Group Ltd., 1984.

Blackwell, Christopher W. "The Council of the Areopagus," in *C.W. Blackwell, ed., Dēmos: Classical Athenian Democracy*, Edition of January 26, 2003.

[https://www.stoa.org/demos/article\\_areopagus@page=10&greekEncoding=UnicodeC.html](https://www.stoa.org/demos/article_areopagus@page=10&greekEncoding=UnicodeC.html)

Del Toro, Guillermo, director. *Crimson Peak*. Universal Pictures, 2015.

Euben, J. Peter. "Justice and the Oresteia" in *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 76 No. 1, 1982, pp. 22-33.

Fletcher, Judith. "Polyphony to Silence: The Jurors of The 'Oresteia'" in *College Literature*, Vol. 41 No. 2, 2014, pp. 56-75.

Foley, Helene P., and Jean E. Howard. "Introduction: The Urgency of Tragedy Now" in *PMLA*, Vol. 129 No. 4, 2014, pp. 617-633.

Fontenrose, Joseph. "Gods and Men in the Oresteia" in *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 102, 1971, pp. 71-109.

Judge, Phoebe, host. "Learning How to Forgive." *Criminal*, episode 139, VoxMedia, May 1, 2020. <https://thisiscriminal.com/episode-139-learning-how-to-forgive-5-1-2020>

McLaughlin, Ellen. "Ellen's Essay on the Oresteia." *Ellenmclaughlin.com*, April 15, 2019. <https://www.ellenmclaughlin.com/ellen-blog/2019/4/16/ellen-on-the-oresteia>

McLaughlin, Ellen. “*The Oresteia*: a Benefit Reading.” *Ellenmclaughlin.com*, January 11, 2021. <https://www.ellenmclaughlin.com/news/the-oresteia-a-benefit-reading>

McLaughlin, Ellen. “The Oresteia.” 2019. Theatrical script.

Tate Modern Museum. “*Doris Salcedo: Shibboleth*.” *Tateshots-1 October 2007*. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/doris-salcedo-2695/doris-salcedo-shibboleth>

“TFANA Talk: The Oresteia (June 26, 2021).” *YouTube*, uploaded by Theatre for a New Audience, 26 June, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvAKRT7EKz8&t=444s>

Tutu, Desmond. "Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South Africa." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 4 Feb. 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Truth-and-Reconciliation-Commission-South-Africa>

Vespas, Dominique. “UW drama’s adaptation of ‘The Oresteia’ explores questions behind justice and humanity.” *UW Daily* [University of Washington, Seattle, WA], March 3, 2023, <https://t.ly/IcBT>

Weiner, Albert. “The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus” in *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 32 No. 2, 1980, pp. 205-212.

### Other Resources

I worked closely with Catherine Heiner, PhD candidate at University of Washington’s School of Drama, to develop a dramaturgy website for this production. The website includes information on the mythology of the original play, background on the playwright, a thorough glossary, and explorations of the play’s themes. All full bibliography of sources for the dramaturgy site can be found here: <https://sites.google.com/view/oresteiauw/home?authuser=0>