



Euripides' *Hecuba* begins with the former queen of Troy newly subjugated—stripped of both power and dignity by the conquering Greeks. She has suddenly found herself at the mercy of her captors: helpless, frightened, and raging, her pleas to the gods signaling her loss of power. Yet, as the action unfolds, we witness a resourceful Hecuba identifying and employing the one weapon she finds readily at her disposal: language and its inherent powers of persuasion.

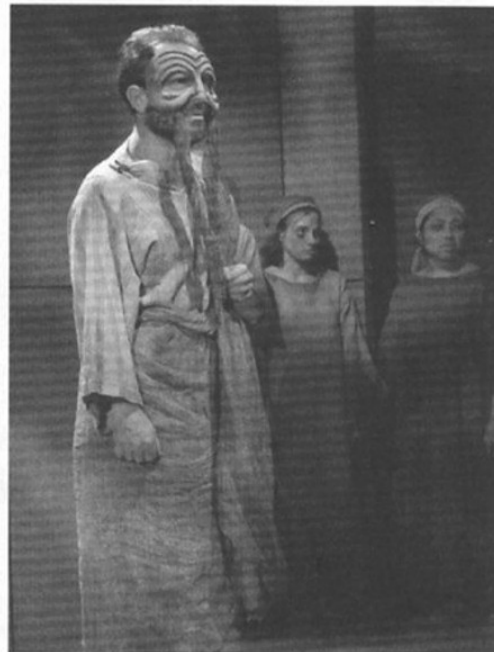
The Pearl Theatre Company's revival of *Hecuba* admirably embraces and clarifies the polemical tensions on display in Euripides' craftily, if unconventionally, composed tragedy. The art of rhetoric, so central to fifth-century BCE Athenian civic life in general and Euripides' dramaturgy in particular, is prominently featured in this most thematically fertile of Greek tragedies, and the Pearl company crisply animates the manipulative argumentations at the heart of the drama. What the production lacks in passion and stylistic invention, it makes up for in rhetorical precision.

Under Shepard Sobel's self-assured direction, Joanne Camp's Hecuba is simultaneously powerful and vulnerable, resourceful and desperate. Her expert manipulation of language in constructing her argumentative pleas to Odysseus and Agamemnon (both played with refreshing simplicity by John Liv-

**HECUBA.** By Euripides. Directed by Shepard Sobel. Pearl Theatre Company, New York City. 15 January 2006.

**THE SEVEN.** By Will Power. Directed by Jo Bonney. Choreographed by Bill T. Jones. New York Theatre Workshop, New York City. 19 January 2006.

In *The Greek Sense of Theatre: Tragedy Reviewed*, classical scholar J. Michael Walton distinguishes between two variant assumptions regarding the nature of ancient Greek theatre: the visual and the spoken. Walton argues that because the extant tragedies are most readily accessible in print while scant evidence remains of the original productions, misguided emphasis has been placed on the plays' literary characteristics as distinct from their theatrical components. Two recent productions—Euripides' *Hecuba*, produced by New York's Pearl Theatre Company, and Will Power's *The Seven* (based on Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes*) at the New York Theatre Workshop—neatly illustrate the competing sensibilities described by Walton.



Dominic Cuskern (Polymestor) in *Hecuba*. Photo: Matthew Shane Coleman.

ingstone Rolle) betrays a woman well versed in the sophistic arts and well aware of her weakened position as conquered subject. The legalistic exchanges between the principals lend appropriate focus to the moral, ethical, and jurisprudential issues at the play's foundation. Unfortunately, the production simultaneously disregards the play's potential power to affect audiences on profoundly visceral levels. The emotional dilemmas dramatized in *Hecuba* are pondered rather than felt, assessed rather than absorbed. The effect undermines Aristotelian notions of catharsis even as it simultaneously illustrates his much-debated relegation of *opsis*, or spectacle, to a subordinate position in tragedy's problematically codified hierarchy.

The creators of *The Seven* embrace an altogether different sensibility. Based on Aeschylus's *Seven against Thebes*, *The Seven* dramatizes the idea that modern practitioners must adopt the totality of the Greek tragedian's conception of theatre—an understanding issuing from a comprehensive employment of drama, music, and dance as integral to achieving the desired emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic effects.

Like Aeschylus before him, Power appropriates a preexisting myth to serve his own dramatic / thematic ends. Power's hip-hop treatment of the story—complete with a live DJ (Amber Efe) as chorus and an Oedipus (Edwin Lee Gibson) reconceived as a 1970s-style pimp—infuses the myth with a contemporary, urban flavor. The result is a triumphantly energetic mix of street rhythms, selected samplings, rap, modern dance, and old-fashioned storytelling techniques, all played out on Richard Hoover's bleak, starkly suggestive set.

The young and spirited cast boldly embraces director Jo Bonney's highly theatrical treatment of the material, supported, to no small degree, by Bill T. Jones's choreography, which manages to be simultaneously explosive and contained. His contributions to *The Seven* might well remind us of the centrality of dance in the theatre of antiquity. As Eteocles, Benton Greene proves resolute and dogmatic, exhibiting an increasing stubbornness provoked, in part, by Right Hand, his manipulative aide, played with appropriate smarminess by Tom Nelis. Janyl Dobson's Polyneices strikes the right note of self-righteous indignation, fueling that peculiar brand of rage that can only be directed at someone you love. The cast is rounded out by a predictably and stereotypically balanced mix of ethnic types, including a clichéd, cat-like Asian martial artist (Pearl Sun). Central to the proceedings is Efe's DJ, who manipulates her turntable as if it were a magic wand, turning back time and assembling familiar samplings of a wide

array of musical stylings. She helps create a vivid, ambient world at once familiar and strange.

It might be argued that Power's interest in the spectacular possibilities of performance leads him too far astray of the cerebral, political, and philosophical dilemmas lurking at the heart of Aeschylus's drama. Indeed, Power's general design deemphasizes the communal import of the myth's narrative premise—the element that would have been of primary interest to Aeschylus's civic-minded audience. Power instead opts for a more detailed exploration of the personal dynamics and growing tensions between the two brothers (it should be noted that Polyneices does not even appear in *Seven against Thebes*). This approach feeds the emotional impact of the familial rift, but it also dilutes those ideas that formed the bedrock of Athenian civic ideology: good citizenry, patriotism, treason, and the prosecution of war—themes that render the story especially relevant to a United States deeply embroiled in an increasingly unpopular war waged in the name of self-defense.

The ambivalence inspired by these themes underscores the ambiguity indicative of Aeschylean morality. Was Aeschylus a jingoistic warrior-poet, championing such Athenian virtues as loyalty and self-sacrifice for the good of the commonweal? Or was he an antiwar dramatist, warning his Athenian contemporaries of the dangers of hubris, complacency, and needless aggression? It should be remembered that *Seven against Thebes* was produced in Athens just eleven years after the end of the Persian conflicts, when the idea of a just war was neither an abstract concept nor a quaint notion, but rather a concrete reality made manifest by the collective Greek armies' heroic resistance. In our current climate of skepticism regarding armed conflict, one might assume that *The Seven* would resonate with the startling complexities attending the myth's primary themes. But the rhetoric emphasized by the Pearl production is suffocated here by *The Seven*'s more viscerally thrilling elements. Power's ability to breathe such exciting life into the ancient myth is commendable; if only he had preserved those vital elements that do not require resuscitation.

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