Review: Thyestes (Hayloft Project, Malthouse Theatre)
October 9th, 2010

Twenty-four hours ago I was in the midst of being cajoled, amused, threatened, assaulted, disturbed, entertained, thoroughly demoralised, enlightened, engaged, repulsed, shocked and abused. The Hayloft Project's modernised take on Seneca's version of the Thystes myth has so much in it, even a day later I am finding it difficult to know where to begin.

Staged at the Malthouse's Tower Theatre, an intimate venue in any case, the audience is split in two - the stage a brightly illuminated box in between the two halves of the paying public. We watch the reaction of the other audience members nearly as much as we watch the actors on stage. They have not so much torn down the walls between character and audience, for the actors remain within this two-sided proscenium throughout, but illuminated our faces reflect what is happening on stage. It's a striking idea for a show that elicits such an emotional, primal response to such classic "Greek tragedy" tropes as incest, dethroning, betrayal, assassination, murder, rape and cannibalism.

Hayloft's **Thyestes**, co-created by its director (Simon Stone) and its trio of actors (Thomas Henning, Chris Ryan, Mark Leonard Winter), is classic drama wrapped in 21st century vernacular and pop culture references. It's also pretty clearly Melbourne in its way, rather than being a generically post-millennium modern Western city. And it's strongly influenced by Tarantino and Scorcese, who dabbled in modern day tragedy with an ironic twist. But Hayloft seems determined to dig deeper. To see if Seneca and the Thyestes myth lives and breathes now.

Its structure is also bold and exciting. This isn't merely a three-hander play telling a vast epic of kingdoms and familial empires. It is, in fact, mostly constructed from the moments that happen in between the grand operatic gestures the story makes. The Queen sends her two sons to kill their half-brother, but instead we are witness to the boys shooting the breeze - in a way that is almost mundane in its familiarity. These are the kinds of conversations we all have, about drinking and music and holidays and girls and... the play lulls us into a false sense of security straight away. Only at the end of scene one are we beset by a feeling of menace - scored by the music of Roy Orbison, a gun only clearly visible to one half of the audience. Some of us are complicit in ways the other half can never be.

These moments between moments are punctuated by complete blackouts - curtains falling - and opera-style surtitles which tell us the Thyestes myth as Seneca wrote it. Then we return to a stage, often transformed in radical ways during each blackout. In fact, while the production is crafty enough to keep the set changes from us until each curtain up, there is a sense the audience is meant to be struck by where they find themselves at each "lights up". It's breathtaking to go from bare stage, to ping-pong table, to dining table, to grand piano (!) lost in a fog, when we feel like we've only been in blackness for mere seconds. The audience is reacting to the production as much as the story even at this very basic level.

The warning at the door and on the website...

THYESTES CONTAINS NUDITY, STRONG SEXUAL THEMES, VIOLENT REFERENCES AND VERY COARSE LANGUAGE. IT IS NOT SUITABLE FOR ANYONE UNDER THE AGE OF 18.

...hardly conveys the show's transgressive, horrifying and repulsive nature. I would say it was particularly hard to shock me, but once the dread sets into this piece and the tragedy begins, I had a pit in my stomach which was unbearable at moments. The acting is naturalistic but stuck in a heightened reality. These may be the scenes in between those of ancient myth, but they are as important as the backbone of the original tales (and retellings) - they take the arcetypal characters and infuse them with a potency which they must have had long ago on the stages of Ancient Greece, before these myths took on a life on their own, became part of our history and our society and became recognisable because of their basic human truths.

The three actor-writer-creators, along with their incredible director, have fashioned an incredible night of theatre, which has received rave reviews and extended a week thanks to the demand. It's a pity a piece this rich couldn't stay around much longer, but a piece this powerful might also lose its energy and vitality if it runs too long. Unlike the myth it portrays, which has lived for millennia and scorched its way into our collective souls. Much like Hayloft's **Thyestes**scorched me last night.

Thyestes closed at the Malthouse tonight.