

‘Oresteia’ Review: A Mother’s Grief, Underestimated

Anastasia Hille is riveting as Klytemnestra in Robert Icke’s production of “Oresteia” at the Park Avenue Armory.

By [Laura Collins-Hughes](#) **The New York Times** July 28, 2022 NYT Critic's Pick



Anastasia Hille “will win plenty of partisans over to Team Klytemnestra,” our critic writes, of the Park Avenue Armory production of “Oresteia.” Credit...Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Before the first domino of their tragedies falls, before murder begets murder begets murder, they are an enchanting family: the mother, Klytemnestra, warm and easy with her two little ones gathered close around her; the father, Agamemnon, suave in public but playful the instant he walks through the door at the end of the day.

In their cozy contemporary sanctuary of a home, they seem so absolutely normal. These people love one another. The boy, Orestes, has never been a good sleeper, but when his bad dreams come, his parents are there to comfort him. And Iphigenia, his sister, is a darling in a citrus-orange dress. Though she is young enough that she totes her long-eared plush bunny everywhere, she is old enough, and smart enough, that she’s already a moral thinker. When the family has venison for dinner, she cannot bear the thought of eating a deer. “It’s a little dead body,” she says.

Is this the deer whose killing so angered the goddess Artemis that she stilled the winds on which Agamemnon’s warships depend? [Robert Icke’s fraught and gripping “Oresteia,”](#) an emotionally harrowing retelling of Aeschylus’ trilogy at the Park Avenue Armory, doesn’t get bogged down in such background details of ancient mythology.

What matters is the excruciating ransom that Agamemnon, a military commander and a great believer in prophecies, thinks he has to pay to get the winds blowing again so he can be victorious in war. He must murder Iphigenia, his curious, trusting, doted-on daughter who wants nothing to do with killing deer and has nothing to do with waging war. “By his hand alone,” the prophecy reads. “The child is the price. Fair winds.” Her innocent life, ended irrevocably, in exchange for maybe — if her father’s faith in the gods and the counsel of serious men is not misplaced — achieving his political objectives. Not, of course, that her mother has been consulted in this, let alone Iphigenia herself.

“If she doesn’t feel pain,” Agamemnon’s brother, Menelaus, says, arguing in favor of snuffing out his niece, “and it is a civilized procedure, and it is the clear and greater good, then who are the victims?”

What is the value of the life of a girl? What is the value of her mother’s clawing grief and bottomless rage at her child’s murder? And how, exactly, has Klytemnestra come off so badly through the ages for her revenge killing of Agamemnon — as if she were singularly evil and crazed while he was simply a decent guy in a difficult position, who’d made the tough call that his own daughter was expendable?



Hille and Angus Wright in Robert Icke’s production, which originated at the Almeida Theater in London in 2015. Credit...Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Told in four acts over three and a half hours, this “Oresteia” is about grief so deep it settles into the soul and metastasizes into a need for bloody vengeance, whose result in turn becomes a cause of more fresh grief. If you’d wondered what unites “Oresteia” thematically with [“Hamlet,” Icke’s other thrilling production](#) running in repertory at the Armory this summer, there it is — two plays in which murders leave survivors bereft and homicidal, and in which one generation of a family suffers the treachery of another. But whereas “Hamlet” centers the title character, this re-centered “Oresteia” is concerned principally not with Orestes, the son, but rather with Klytemnestra, his haunted mother. “This whole thing,” she tells Iphigenia’s ghost as it flits through the house, “this whole thing is about you.”

When this production by the Armory and the Almeida Theater was first announced, it was meant to star Lia Williams as Klytemnestra, reprising the role she had played in London, but an injury forced

her to leave the show before previews began. Anastasia Hille is the Armory's Klytemnestra, and she is magnificent in an incandescent, utterly sympathetic interpretation so riveting that you would do well to spend the entire first intermission watching Klytemnestra simply sit onstage, in a stupor of grief that ages her by the next act. Hille will win plenty of partisans over to Team Klytemnestra — even as the play would also like to draw its audience's attention to the needless, cyclical horror of murder and revenge, and the self-righteous delusion that just one more death will even the score for good.

In the terrifyingly real depiction of a loving marriage that's destroyed before our eyes, Hille is matched every inch by Angus Wright as Agamemnon. After Klytemnestra realizes that he plans to murder Iphigenia (beautifully played at the performance I saw by Alexis Rae Forlenza, one of two young actors who share the role), the fight they have is so brutal and raw that you may recall its dynamics from the most damaging domestic argument you've ever had. "This is about a person who came from us, who would never have lived if we hadn't loved each other," Klytemnestra says, pleading her daughter's case in the hope that her husband will hear reason. "What you are destroying is us, doing something that will overwhelm our history, a single action which if you bring it down on us will obliterate the whole story which precedes it."



Tia Bannon, foreground left, and Luke Treadaway, with, background from left: Elyana Faith Randolph, Angus Wright and Hille. Credit...Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

By the end of their fight, the current of intimacy that ran between them for years is shut off. They are for all intents and purposes exes, effective immediately, with any further emotional access denied. Which, in the bruised and intricate psychic honesty of this play, does not mean the love has entirely vanished.

On a set by Hildegard Bechtler so chic it looks like what you'd get if Norman Foster and Richard Serra retrofitted an ancient castle, "Oresteia" seeks to implicate us in its patterns of needless destruction: Whenever the lights come up on the auditorium, we're reflected in the set's long glass wall.

The show is peppered with tiny oddities and puzzlements that become clear, mostly, at the end. Slight spoiler: The reason that the grown-up Orestes (Luke Treadaway) watches much of the action from outside the periphery of the house is that he is immersed in a court proceeding, to determine his guilt in the murder of his mother. His memory is often uncertain. The woman questioning him (Kirsty Rider) doesn't really buy that his other sister Electra (Tia Bannan), who conspired with him to kill Klytemnestra, even existed. The text hints that maybe she didn't. There is a whiff of mystery about it all.

But the tragedy of it is paramount — one set in motion by superstitious men who took it on faith that the life of a little girl didn't matter, and who never stopped to think that her mother would counterattack.