

## Lukáš Brutovský's *Hekuba* (Marina Carr) *Klára Witzany Hutková, Charles University, Faculty of Arts*

For one day only, the Czech audience had the opportunity to see a formidable production of the Irish playwright Marina Carr's *Hecuba*, directed by Lukáš Brutovský from neighbouring Slovakia. Staging the aftermath of the Trojan War, the tragedy focuses on Hecuba (Lucia Jašková), the fallen Trojan queen. An adaptation of Euripides' play of the same name, the tragedy had been previously produced in England by the Royal Shakespeare Company (2015) and in Ireland by the Rough Magic Theatre Company (2019). Brutovský directed his own translation from English into Slovak, titled *Hekuba*. This version premiered on February 17, 2023, in the Slovak Chamber Theatre in Martin, Slovakia, produced in collaboration with the Slovak Institute in Prague. The accurate translation, combined with Brutovský's fresh artistic vision, resulted in an impressive new stage adaptation, departing significantly from the previous productions.

On October 8, 2023, the Slovak cast performed Brutovský's *Hekuba* as part of a day of Slovak theatre at Divadlo Komédie in Prague. Preceded by *Iokasté*, Brutovský's own take on the myth of Jocasta, *Hekuba* was staged second and followed by *Bačova žena*, a Slovak play by Ivan Stodola. All three performances were directed by Brutovský and used the same basic set design. The overarching theme of the day was the representation of female characters. *Bačova žena* (*The Shepherd's Wife*), as well as *Hekuba*, present strong heroines navigating desperate situations. In contrast, the meta-theatrical *Iokasté* thematised the virtual absence of Jocasta as a character in canonical versions of the Oedipus myth. All three plays were followed by a public discussion.

During a conversation with the director, Brutovský explained that Carr's *Hecuba* had attracted him by the style in which it was written. Merging

various perspectives, the tragedy is told entirely in short monologues, with dialogue scenes retold by characters in the reported speech form. The effect of this experimental soliloquy technique has been debated by many critics, both in positive and negative terms. The style is often lauded for allowing for a much deeper elaboration of human psychology. The characters are continuously describing their feelings and sharing their inner thoughts, and these are spoken by the actors out loud with the same frequency as the words that have been uttered in the reported dialogues. At the same time, the style poses a great challenge for the cast and the creative team, as the repetition of speech tags, such as "I say" or "He says", is very frequent. The virtual absence of ordinary dialogue also has the potential to turn the play into an overly monolithic stream of overlapping consciousnesses.

This production's line of attack was two-fold, in addition to the overall very impressive acting. Pavel Baborák's set design, composed predominantly of a long, even slope on which the actors would walk, sit, as well as climb up and slide down, used lighting to foreground characters' speech. This is perhaps most impressive in the opening scene, where Hecuba, surrounded by all the other characters in the play, delivers her first lines with a bright rectangle of light cast over her. Throughout the performance, the light follows the speakers in this way, usually flickering on the character whose speech is almost over, as well as on the one who is about to speak next. Additionally, breaks between scenes are filled with dance-like motion, directed by Stanislava Vlčeková and performed by the actors currently on stage as isolated performances, thus strengthening the idea of their seclusion from one another in their individual subjectivities. The unnerving music and the movement

it inspires in the characters also add to the spectators' feeling of uneasiness, as they watch a civilisation fall and humanity disintegrate on stage.

Subverting the Homeric narrative of the Trojan war as a successful and just venture, Carr's adaptation foregrounds civilian suffering to imply that no war of conquest can ever be justified. As Hecuba is claiming that the mythical Helen has never existed, invented instead by the Greeks to be used as pretext for an invasion, the audience may be reminded of the second Gulf War, justified by unfounded assertions regarding Iraq's weapon programmes. The play is also a painful reminder of the war raging in Ukraine, and in other parts of the world. As in Carr's later play *Girl on an Altar* (first produced in 2022 at the Kiln Theatre in London), the patriarchal myth is reframed to convey an experience of helplessness and vulnerability in war, as regards both the conquered and the conquering. Hecuba sees her kingdom being overthrown, the bodies of her butchered children and husband following her wherever she goes. Her daughter Polyxena (Barbora Palčíková) is sacrificed by the Greeks during the play, and Hecuba's last living son, the child Polydorus (Matej Babej), is executed following a tactical decision made by the leader of the Greek armies, Agamemnon (Marek Gejšberg).

However, as opposed to Euripides' version, in Carr's adaptation, Hecuba does not let the soldiers take Polyxena away from her but follows them, looking her daughter in the eyes until they eventually close. In this way, Carr inserts a new form of heroism into the Classical tradition, portraying maternal enduring and self-sacrifice as not simply worthy of pity, but also of awe. Broken down by the experience, though, Hecuba very unexpectedly engages in sexual intercourse with Agamemnon. This narrative addition is another of Carr's artistic choices that has received mixed reactions in reviews, but it is staged slightly differently in this production. Usually, a certain connection, based on a mutual understanding, is implied to exist between the two members of royalty. Although they find themselves on opposing sides of the conflict, both

Hecuba and Agamemnon are forced into certain actions by external circumstances. Carr reframes the sacrificial killing of Polyxena as a public performance meant to strengthen Agamemnon's position as a leader, and to quell a possible rebellion. The script makes clear his unwillingness to perform what evokes the sacrifice of his own daughter, Iphigenia, that he had to make prior to the Trojan War. In the original 2015 production, two cones of light are cast on Agamemnon and Hecuba at the end of the sacrificial scene, at a moment where the Greek tribes threaten to trample them both. For this brief moment, the two enemies seem united in their precarious positions. The shared experience of royals trying to, at different times, cling to their power, is thus a likely explanation of the ensuing connection between the two.

However, this theme of mutual understanding is missing in Brutovský's production, despite some potential for it in the original script. Brutovský decided to cross out the last section of the monologue that Hecuba delivers just before kissing Agamemnon, so that the queen's speech ends with her thoughts on Polydorus: "Polydorus. Spare him. It's in your power, I want to say, but some instinct silences me."<sup>11</sup> Unaware that he has already been murdered, Hecuba is still hopeful that Agamemnon will spare her son. However, the original script continues:

You do not bargain with love, you take it when it's offered. However fleetingly and from the strangest quarters, the last solace. Don't sully it. And something tells me Polydorus is gone.<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, the sexual scene is reframed in this production as primarily a maternal strategy to appease the invader and save what can be saved.

This is an excellent production with a very strong cast. Polyxena's emphasised sensuousness is interestingly contrasted with the majestic dignity of the prophetess Cassandra (Zuzana Rohoňová), the less likable of these two sisters in Carr's play. The Thracian king Polymestor (Tomáš Mischura) lacks a backbone, as opposed to his version in the English production.

<sup>11</sup> Marina Carr, *Marina Carr: Plays 3* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), 254.

<sup>12</sup> Carr, *Plays 3*, 254.

An adult actor has been cast as the child Polydorus, which has been somewhat ambiguously mitigated by Markéta Sládečková's decision to dress him in diapers. Overall, this is a significant contribution to the list of productions of *Hecuba*, one that will be hard to top in the years to come.

*The review process was financially supported by Charles University Grant Agency, project no. 150122, entitled "Giving Voice to the Outsider: Marina Carr's Revision of the Other of Classical Athens", implemented at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University.*

## Bibliography

Marina Carr. *Marina Carr: Plays 3*. London: Faber & Faber, 2015.