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Aeschylus' *The Persians*
11-21 August 2010, Brecon Beacons

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2010 was the launch year of the National Theatre for Wales, and so NTW set out to perform twelve plays over the course of the year: *The Persians* – directed by Mike Pearson and performed on a military base up in the Brecon Beacons which is not usually open to civilians – was the sixth play of this series, and certainly seemed to be one of the most exciting and ambitious.

I had high hopes for this production. There had been praise-filled news reports generated by interest in the play's unusual set piece of an open-fronted house, part of the fake village of Cilieni constructed to train troops in urban warfare, and numerous glowing reviews from performances earlier in the run. For Charles Spencer in *The Telegraph*, the production was 'extraordinary, one of the most imaginative, powerful and haunting theatrical events of the year';¹ the *Guardian's* Michael Billington's four-star review called it 'superb';² and the BBC's Review Show were, a few months after the run ended, to put it in their top ten productions of 2010. Alas, my own rating is not quite so high. I would like to think that my sitting through torrential rain for the duration of the performance did not unfairly influence my view of the play, but rather it heightened some of the problems inherent with the production that those who had the good fortune to attend during slightly more clement weather – and were therefore able to get lost in the moment, rather than continually brought back to their soggy seat – might not have noticed.

But our journey as audience members started not in the soggy seats, nor at the cross-sectioned house, or even in the empty village of Cilieni; we gathered, at first, in the car park of the Sennybridge Camp and Army Field

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/7944762/The-Persians-National-Theatre-of-Wales-review.html>

² <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2010/aug/13/the-persians-review-brecon-beacons>

Training Centre, where we boarded coaches to take us up to the army range and Cilieni. White noise was played through the PA system on the coaches, while the on-board television screens flickered and crackled with static: part of the production or a technical error? Apparently the former, intended to set the scene, but this was not entirely clear.

The PA system aside, there was palpable excitement amongst the khaki-enveloped audience members (we had all been given army-issue ponchos and told that we must wear them) as we disembarked from our coaches and walked together through the drizzle and the eerily deserted village, past a burnt-out tank on one side, houses bare of windows on the other. We amassed in front of a podium, in what would have been the village green or market square had this been a real village – the perfect setting for a motivational, political speech from the Chorus, giving us a back story not just to the play but to ourselves as characters: we were no longer audience members, we were Persians awaiting news of the battle.

Next, a short walk away from the village, to the famous set piece: the open-fronted house, used by the army trainers to show recruits how to storm a building, repurposed here as the setting for the rest of the play. However, as the night grew darker and the drizzle became harder and harder and the play continued in front of us in this one location – essentially no different to a proscenium arch theatre, except for the lack of roof – we were no longer Persian villagers, we were increasingly cold, wet audience members sat on unsheltered damp benches with torrential rain driving into our faces.

The grand set piece was not, unfortunately, used to its full potential, although it was interesting to see such use of the vertical space afforded by the multiple storeys in the house, since most plays are limited to a horizontal staging. However, at times it seemed almost as if there was no rhyme or reason as to what the production wanted this house to do or be. At first it seemed like we were looking into Persian HQ, with a war room (manned by the Chorus) downstairs and royal quarters upstairs. But as the play progressed characters moved between rooms as if there were no divisions between them – or

conversely created dividing walls with large flats for no apparent reason. Perhaps we were supposed to see the characters invading each other's spaces as part of the privacy invasion inherent in the Big Brother-style filming and broadcasting of the drama, or indeed our own overt spying through the house's open façade, but instead it came across as rather confused and a waste of the opportunities offered by the space and the setting.

As well as the characters inhabiting various rooms across the different levels of the house there were also television screens set up on many of the walls, and a large screen across the top of the house, under the eaves. These showed close-ups of different members of the cast or simply replicated the action on stage (filmed by an on-set cameraman, and by one of the Chorus members who had a camera attached to his wrist). This meant that there was often too much to look at. Did we look at Sian Thomas's magnificent portrayal of Atossa (or rather 'Queen', as the character was called in Kaite [*sic*] O'Reilly's adaptation of the play) as she reacted to the news of the Persian defeat, or did we look at the projected version of Atossa in close-up on the big screen at the top of the house? Or did we watch the Chorus' uncoordinated flailings going on in another room? (The Chorus' actions whilst others were speaking were often at best baffling, at worst distracting. Were they acting out the words of other characters through the medium of abstract dance? It was not clear). If we watched a screen rather than the live action then did we watch the big screen, or one of the many TV screens in the rooms of the house (the screens often showed different footage, from different angles, to each other)? Did we just watch the cameraman instead?

That being said, some aspects of the setting and technology worked well to dramatise some of the trickier parts of Greek tragedy for modern audiences to enjoy. The Messenger's video-link report, for example, was an ideal way of dealing with one of the longer messenger speeches in extant Greek tragedy. We are so used to seeing camo-clad reporters on location deliver long speeches to camera on our television screens that this seemed like a natural medium for the Messenger to broadcast his news. The report had clearly

been pre-recorded, however, unless it really was a live-link from somewhere a lot sunnier than Brecon on a stormy Friday evening.

Despite being our only extant Greek tragedy based on historical events rather than myth, the *Persians* still features a ghost evocation, and this was another success for the technical element of the production. Darius' ghost's appearance, projected onto the big screen at the top of the house after darkness had fallen, meant that his disembodied head seemed to float, spectre-like, above the other characters. In an otherwise matter-of-fact and realistic production this was a good way of dealing with the supernatural aspect in the play, even if this, too, seemed to have been pre-recorded (neither Paul Rhys as Darius nor Richard Harrington's Messenger appeared to be present during the curtain call – *sans* curtains, of course – at the end of the show).

Notwithstanding the weather, the production was not a complete washout. The initial scene set in the village green was marvellous and the quality of the acting all round was first-class. And it was not just the audience who had to spend the evening getting wet – although for the most part the actors were protected by the house, the Chorus especially did go outside and, without protective army-issue ponchos, were utterly soaked to the skin by the final scenes but carried on regardless. It was certainly a theatrical experience that I shall never forget.