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Adolygiadau / Reviews

***The Persians*, National Theatre Wales, Brecon Beacons, August 2010**

National Theatre Wales's magnificent *The Persians*, presented at the Cilieni 'village', on the Mynydd Epynt firing ranges in August 2010, was a representation of lamentation and despair at the failure of a grand military and imperial project. The resonance of the play was immediate and powerful, concerning war between West and (Middle) East, and dwelling arduously on the human consequences of conflict: it is a play that has come back into its own in the last ten years because of its congruence with the Western powers' experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan. But *The Persians* was never in thrall to its topicality; this was not a production that sought to capitalize upon its contemporariness at the expense of the power and complexity of its theatricality.

It was bold in its remarkable loyalty to the elemental, static dramaturgy of Aeschylus's text, unsparingly translated by Kaite O'Reilly. This is not a play of unceasing action. Rather, most of the actions shown on stage are of no consequence in themselves: the events that are the cause of the drama have already taken place elsewhere, and are now without remedy. All that is available to the characters and the audience is an appalled spectatorship, and the stillness of the main characters becomes a shared theatrical expression of their own horror and of the audience's mounting sense of the awful purposelessness of war. Atossa, the Persian queen (played

by Sian Thomas), in particular, was rendered powerfully immobile by her increasing awareness at the scale of the military disaster. Meanwhile, around and beneath her, the four-man chorus (Richard Lynch, Gerald Tyler, Richard Huw Morgan and John Rowley) travelled in and out of the main action, from scenes in which their condemnation of the young warrior king, Xerxes, was voiced directly to the audience and to Atossa, to those in which they posed listlessly, like humourless satyrs, disrupting – almost denying – the spectacle, but also reinforcing the emotional movement inside the queen's stasis.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, this was a production that had many of the features of the work of Brith Gof, especially its relation to the notion of stratigraphy – the layering of action, scenography, music and so on – by which the various compositional elements were kept discrete, creating a hybrid rather than a unified body of performance. Hence, the various physical acts presented on site did not dilate into a scenic act: they were instead caught in a kind of conflict with each other, the one displacing the other rather than supplementing it. In this respect, the production made highly effective use of video projection, a device that helped to create multiple dramatic 'surfaces', either by rendering the live action double (through relaying close-ups of the main characters), or by creating a pseudo-live feed, as was the case with the account of the slaughter given by the Messenger (played by Richard Harrington).

But the most telling effect of the production was the way in which the restrictions on the scope of the dramatic action brought the nature of the space into play. The scenic design was dealt with in an extraordinarily effective and controlled way by scenographer Simon Banham and director Mike Pearson. Pearson, along with the late Cliff McLucas, pioneered Brith Gof's approach to site-specific performance, in which a 'host' site was visited by a 'ghost' architecture. The great coup in this case, however, was that the 'ghost' architectures on Epynt are permanent. The displacing of the site's normal function, and its redefinition as a site for performance, is part of the history of the place. That which the military have built here has created a landscape that is at war with its own image. As the audience walked along the strip, mockingly called Stryd-y-Collen, to arrive at the square where the first scenes were enacted, we were left to speculate about this place – unmediated, resistant to our need for facility, proud of its inaccessibility. The main setting for the action – the faceless house in which most of the play was presented – did not fill the audience's sightline. Always present in the visual field was the Cilieni valley, curiously receding into the stage picture, deceptive in its assumed rural tranquillity in a place that has become an idyll of death. There could be no pretence here that this landscape could cleave itself to the audience's imagination, that it would allow itself to be transformed into an amenable space for theatrical 'magic'. It was always vehemently indifferent to this

production, and resisted any complicity in its poeticization.

Within this proscenium in limbo – it had been designed (I presume) as a ‘theatre’ to demonstrate military techniques of taking and occupying a built space, to reveal the actions of the pliable, bruisable body in relation to the unyielding, denuded breeze block walls – the characters, ever more emotionally fragile as the disaster of their military campaign became apparent to them and waiting for the blow that would shatter their hope and humanity, gradually acquired the stone-like quality both of their own death and of their surroundings.

As they gradually became one with the matter around them, they were addressed, from a place beyond materiality (via video projection) by their great hero, Darius the king (played by Paul Rhys), who was by this point rendered an impotent spectator to their pain. The house which had assumed a physical presence, as human as anything could be in this place, became an insistently loquacious dead head, a kind of Orphic apparition. Here, in the ultimate disjunction between the breeze block materiality and the virtual presence of the human, there was a kind of lyricism.

A house which was not a house, in a village which is not a village, was thus temporarily requisitioned to tell the story of the violent obliteration of an entire generation of men in a location which was itself, once, forcibly cleared of its people. The careful, studied violence of the action of placing this work of theatre on Epynt dynamized and dilated the entire context.

Roger Owen
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Jamie Medhurst, *A History of Independent Television in Wales* (University of Wales Press, 2010; ISBN: 978-0-7083-2213-0 [pb])

I should start by saying that I have been reading Jamie Medhurst’s scholarly history at yet another time of ‘crisis’ for broadcasting in Wales – this time centred on the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government’s decision to ask the BBC to fund S4C from the licence fee. This description of course oversimplifies a situation that has wide-ranging implications, not only for Wales, but for broadcasting in the UK. However, this is a review of a book and not an account of the issues facing broadcasting in Wales in late 2010. I mention the current situation though because I was immediately struck by how the fundamental questions that Medhurst’s history deals with remain so deeply entrenched in public discourse not only about broadcasting in Wales, but about national identity itself.

This I think is the book’s strength. Through a painstaking approach to the history of one important aspect of television in Wales it constantly asks the reader to reflect on some of the key questions surrounding the highly eventful history of Wales itself, at least in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These include of course the role of the Welsh and English languages in the formation of national identity, the related questions of any ‘unified’ sense of Welshness in the face of fundamental geographical divisions, the relationship of Wales to the forces of international capitalism and the place of the nation state itself (especially small nations) in an era of ever diversifying mass communication.

The great pity about the book is alluded to in the first few pages, namely

that its original intentions were severely compromised:

The original aim of this book was to provide a complete and detailed history of ITV from 1956 up to the takeover of HTV by United News and Media in 1997. However, commercial sensitivities at ITV plc prevented me from accessing any information after 1968 that was not already in the public domain. (pp. 2–3)

One can of course sense the author’s very understandable disappointment and it is right and proper that this limitation, on what is otherwise a meticulously researched project, is acknowledged up front. The mistake for me though was to not change or at least modify the book’s title, because, as Medhurst freely admits, the book is really a history up to 1967 (the date when HTV took over the Wales and West independent television franchise) with only a brief summary of the period 1968–97 together with a postscript that alludes to more recent events. Not changing the title sets up expectations in potential readers that cannot be met, something which has already been alluded to rather aggressively by at least one critic writing from the privileged position of a television ‘insider’.

It is a great shame that this mismatch between the book’s title and what it has been possible to achieve in scholarly terms has been allowed to cloud its reception, because Medhurst’s account is, in most ways, fascinating and very useful. As I have already mentioned, the bulk of it is based upon painstaking primary research using documents that have either not previously been in the public domain or which have not received the kind of attention that they deserve. These include ‘official’ records