

Classics on TV: Greek Tragedy on the Small Screen at BFI Southbank in June *with Fiona Shaw on stage*



The **BFI** is launching a season of rarely-seen-before TV productions of Greek tragedy, offering a fascinating range of approaches to screen presentations of ancient Greece. These plays laid the very foundations of dramatic form and still speak so powerfully over two and a half millennia, but adaptations have now completely disappeared from our TV screens. From the first documented British television production of the genre in 1958, a moving **Women of Troy** with a set dressed to look like a refugee camp (BBC), around 25 richly interesting classical dramas were transmitted across BBC, ITV and Channel 4. The most recent major production was Don Taylor's 1990 BBC presentation of **Iphigenia at Aulis**, starring a magisterial **Fiona Shaw**. During the season audiences will not only be able to see **Iphigenia at Aulis** on the big screen, but also see **Fiona Shaw** take part in a Q&A and panel discussion exploring the rich history of Greek plays on British TV.

Certain of the productions which will be showing were original creations for television. One such example is the lavish 1972 BBC production of **King Oedipus** with Ian Holm, set in an indistinct Middle Eastern locale with colonial overtones and a quirkily sexual interpretation of the Greek chorus. A number of the television productions were re-presentations of existing theatre productions. Among them are the absorbing 1962 production of Sophocles' **Electra** (ITV), which was daringly presented in Modern Greek

without subtitles, and the five-hour Channel 4 transmission of Peter Hall's National Theatre **Oresteia** trilogy (1983) which was performed by an all-male masked cast. In addition there were educational programmes made for schools or The Open University. Noteworthy here is **Patrick Stewart's** performance in the title role of a powerfully stylised production of **Oedipus Tyrannus** (1977).

Another great pleasure on offer is the creative responses of set and costume designers to ancient Greece and to its performance spaces and conventions. Striking in this regard is the brilliant 'sci-fi' **Agamemnon** (1979) with costumes by Barbara Kidd, who was feted for her work on *Doctor Who*. Accompanying this screening is the original television play **Of Mycenae and Men**, which was originally broadcast alongside **Agamemnon** in 1979. Written in the manner of an ancient satyr play, this original comedy brilliantly parodies **Agamemnon** in its telling of the marital reunion of the incomparable Helen (Diana Dors) and her long-suffering husband Menelaus (Freddie Jones) on their return home from Troy.

Despite being written for a 5th-century BC Athenian audience, the Greek tragedy appeals to the universality of human experience and is concerned with profound questions about the fundamentals of life. The ten productions in this season prove to be as relevant to us today as they were when first televised and the season provides a rare opportunity to see major stars, including **Greg Hicks, Helen Mirren, Diana Rigg** and **Patrick Stewart**, perform these canonical works from the ancient Greek repertoire on the big screen.

Programmed in association with Screen Plays: Theatre Plays on British Television, an AHRC-funded research project based in the School of Media, Arts and Design, University of Westminster.

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER

Screenings as part of the season throughout June:

Electra

ITV. 1962. Dir Joan Kemp-Welch. With Aspasia Papathanasiou, Georgia Saris. 58min. Greek language

Consumed by grief for her father's murder at the hand of her mother and lover, Electra is passionately intent on deadly revenge which is enacted on the return of her long-lost brother Orestes. Associated Rediffusion's expressive and beautifully choreographed version of Dimitris Rondiris' internationally touring Peiraikon Theatron production boldly presents Sophocles' play in modern Greek without subtitles.

+ Extract: Women of Troy

Television World Theatre. BBC 1958. Prod Caspar Wrede & Michael Elliott. With Catherine Lacey, Patrick Wymark. 17min (of original 80min) extant

In this extract from the earliest known British television production of a Greek play, the enslaved Trojan women of Euripides' drama huddle on a refugee camp set, anxiously exploring their powerless predicament, when the Greeks arrive to take Andromache's young son away to be killed.

+ Panel + Q&A with Fiona Shaw

Join actor Fiona Shaw and Classics scholar Oliver Taplin in a discussion (chaired by season organiser Amanda Wrigley) exploring the rich history of Greek plays on British television.

Wed 13 June 18:15 NFT3

King Oedipus

Play of the Month. BBC 1972. Dir Alan Bridges. With Sheila Allen, Anthony Bate, Ian Holm, Alan Webb. 75min

This ambitious and lavish production reinvents the Sophoclean play for the small screen, making creative use of the Chorus and open-plan studio space to underline the magnitude of what will be lost when Oedipus' true identity as the husband of his mother is revealed.

+ Oedipus Tyrannus

BBC - *The Open University* 1977. Dir Richard Callanan. With Rosalie Crutchley, Patrick Stewart, John Forbes-Robertson, Ronald Radd. 50 min

This Open University production of the abridged second half of the play uses stylised performances from half-masked actors and bold choreography for the Chorus to emphasise the inescapability of Oedipus' path to knowledge of his lineage and the horror that ensues.

With thanks to *The Open University*

Thu 7 June 18:10 NFT3

The Serpent Son: Part One: Agamemnon

BBC 1979. Dir Bill Hays. With Helen Mirren, Denis Quilley, Diana Rigg. 95min.

A superb performance from Diana Rigg as the husband-killer Clytemnestra dominates this production from Aeschylus' *Oresteia* which tells the tale of Agamemnon's fate after arriving home from the Trojan War. Innovative use of state-of-the-art technology and bold costume design make for a striking production of this ancient play of murderous revenge.

+ Of Mycenae and Men

BBC 1979. Dir Hugh David. With Diana Dors, Bob Hoskins, Freddie Jones. 30min

Written by Frederic Raphael and Kenneth McLeish (the translators of *The Serpent Son*), this original comedy in the manner of an ancient Greek satyr play brilliantly parodies *Agamemnon* in its telling of the less-than-successful reunion of Helen with husband Menelaus after the fall of Troy.

Tue 19 June 18:10 NFT2

The Oresteia

C4 1983. Dir Peter Hall. With David Bamber, Philip Donaghy, Greg Hicks, John Normington. 97 + 69 + 69min + interval

Peter Hall's famous 1981 production of the all-male, masked *Oresteia* for the National Theatre was transmitted by Channel 4 over one evening in 1983. This screening of the entire Aeschylean trilogy (comprising *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers* and *Furies*) is a rare chance to experience in a single day Tony Harrison's muscular text and Harrison Birtwistle's percussive score, in tight orchestration with the TV camera, expressing the relentless and inescapable momentum of one of the defining achievements of Western drama.

With thanks to the National Theatre

Sat 23 June 15:50 NFT3

**National
Theatre**

Iphigenia at Aulis

Theatre Night. BBC 1990. Dir Don Taylor. With Imogen Boorman, Roy Marsden, Fiona Shaw, Tim Woodward. 120min

Fiona Shaw is a magisterial Clytemnestra in this tale of her husband Agamemnon's plot to sacrifice their daughter Iphigenia to secure fair winds for the journey to Troy. The production offers compelling performances of the psychological battles within both father and daughter and contrasts powerful female strength with muscular militarism.

Tue 26 June 18:00 NFT3

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NOTES TO EDITORS

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- Championing emerging and world class film makers in the UK
- Investing in creative, distinctive and entertaining work
- Promoting British film and talent to the world
- Growing the next generation of film makers and audiences

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