

The lasting significance of *The Trojan Women*

Piyaseeli Wijegunasingha
3 April 2000

An adaptation in Sinhala of Euripides' play, translation by Ariyawansa Ranaweera, script by Ananda Wakkumbura and Dharmasiri Bandaranayaka, directed by Dharmasiri Bandaranayaka

Euripides (485-406 BC) is considered to be the most socially critical of all the ancient Greek tragedians. *The Trojan Women* (415 BC) has long been considered an innovative artistic portrayal of the Trojan War and a penetrating depiction of the barbaric behaviour of Euripides' own countrymen, the Athenians, towards the women and children of the people they subjugated in war.

In *The Trojan Women* we also see portrayed in a rather pronounced way, an ancient people (to be more specific, women belonging to an ancient people), led by the circumstances they find themselves in, to question their faith in the traditional pantheon of gods. For instance we see Hecabe, the Queen of Troy, who has become a prisoner of war, questioning faith in the gods as well as man's dependence on them. The futility of expecting wisdom and justice from the gods is expressed again and again.

Euripides' play reveals how an ancient people is brought to recognise the naiveté of the belief in a pantheon of gods with complete power over the destinies of men. The gods are spoken of and portrayed in *The Trojan Women* as jealous, head-strong and capricious. These facts themselves would have disturbed the more politically conservative contemporaries of Euripides, and it is well known that he was looked upon with mistrust by ruling class ideologues of his day.

Whatever the beliefs expressed by the characters Euripides created, and the beliefs he himself held, man had still to travel a long way before becoming conscious of the fact that he had the social ability to become master of his own fate. What was expressed in the belief in the gods held by the Greeks of the heroic age, as well as of the classical age, if not the relative "helplessness" of social man before nature, including society?

The Trojan Women, like any other significant literary work, in an artistically powerful and memorable manner, adds certain grains of truth to human knowledge: that man caught in the midst of the contradictions of war, whether it be archaic tribal war or wars created by ruling classes in modern society, becomes the perpetrator of the most ruthless violence on his opponents, especially on defenceless women and children.

Anoja Weerasinghe plays Hecabe in Dharmasiri Bandaranayaka's production. It is well known that her house, with all her possessions of artistic and cultural value, was burned to the ground by goon squads employed by unscrupulous politicians in the recent spate of post-presidential election violence in Sri Lanka. Reading the statement Weerasinghe made to the press regarding this incident one feels that it carries traces of her personal understanding of Euripides' play. Emphasising that we are not in agreement with her politics, we would like to quote the following passage from her statement to the press:

"Why did they harass me in this way? It is simply because I am a woman. Maybe they thought that I am a single woman. They showed their power, truly their cowardice, to an unarmed and innocent actress. I have spoken out about the intimidation faced by women. I have appealed for

the creation of a society that is safe for women ... and I have urged lawmakers to formulate a legal framework that will make this possible ..."

It is clear that particularly the phrase, "I have appealed for the creation of a society that is safe for women," expresses the agony long undergone by a woman who is also a professional artist, due to social suppression as well as oppression. Though Anoja Weerasinghe believes that a society safe for women can be created by urging lawmakers to formulate a legal framework, the only society that can ensure safety for women is one consciously organised along socialist principles—where not only the public ownership of the means of production historically necessary for the social liberation of women, but also all the necessary resources for the all-sided spiritual development of mankind, will be available.

The capacity of *The Trojan Women* to suggest powerfully and vividly the destruction wrought on women in general as a result of war rests to a great extent on the fact that the characters differ from each other in their social situations as well as in their personalities.

Even if one prefers to refrain from suggesting that in the aftermath of the Trojan War some women suffer more than the others, it must be stated that the Trojan slave women (in the play's chorus) continue to bewail their inability to know the fate which awaits them, whereas the women of the aristocracy are able to learn their respective destinies from the messengers who arrive from time to time from the enemy camp. The slave women bemoan not only their future, about which they are in the dark, but also their being severed from the environment and the life which they have got used to even as slaves. That the Trojan slave women are subjected to even more degrading and bestial treatment by the enemy is clearly brought out in Bandaranayaka's production.

The leaders of the Greek army consider the aristocratic female prisoners "prestigious" spoils of war to be divided amongst themselves. The very fact that they are noblewomen seems to add to the "glory" of the men who are able to carry them home as part of the loot won in war.

Hecabe, the Trojan King Priam's widow, is to become the slave of Odysseus, a man she abhors. Hecabe's younger daughter Polyxena is sacrificed at the tomb of the Greek hero Achilles as an offering to his corpse. Even though Polyxena does not appear on stage, what we learn of her creates in the spectator's mind the image of a young girl of child-like innocence and purity.

Andromache is the widow of the renowned Trojan hero Hector, fallen in battle. Hector is Priam's and Hecabe's son. Andromache, surrounded by Greek soldiers, appears before the Trojan women prisoners' camp clutching Hector's small son to her body. In lamenting her misfortune, she reveals that her life's aim was to be a dutiful wife whose praises would be sung by the people:

Andromache: "I aimed at a glorious name and though I won this in generous measure, good fortune eluded my arrow. All the accomplishments that bring credit to a woman I strove to put into practice in the house of Hector. In the first instance in the matter where a woman

gets a bad reputation (whether she attracts criticism or not), namely not remaining indoors, I suppressed my longing and stayed in the house. And inside the house I would not tolerate the idle gossip of women but was content to have in my mind a teacher I could trust.... And it was because my reputation for this reached the ears of the Greek army that my doom was sealed.”

Andromache has been chosen by Neoptolemus to be his concubine and she faces the dilemma of a woman who had been a devoted wife now forced to share the bed of a stranger—one of the enemy who had killed her husband and laid Troy to waste.

Andromache: “Now if I dismiss any thought of my beloved Hector and open my heart to my new husband, it will seem that I have betrayed the dead. But if alternately, I turn away from him in loathing I will earn the hatred of my own master.... Not even hope have I, something that is left to all mortals, nor do I delude myself that fortune will show me any kindness, though, even fancies like this bring comfort.”

The women waiting at the camp which is their temporary dwelling as well as their prison, until their fates are finally sealed, descend deeper and deeper into the depths of misery as they are exposed to the barbarism of the enemy. This situation comes to a head when Talthibius, the Greek messenger, returns from the enemy camp to say that the council of war has decided to execute Hector's and Andromache's small son, who if he lived could become a danger to the Greeks.

Hecabe's elder daughter Cassandra had been the maiden priestess of Apollo. Talthibius reveals that Cassandra had been “chosen as a special prize by the Greek king Agamemnon to warm his bed in the hours of darkness.”

In the Sinhala version of *The Trojan Women*, Cassandra captivates the imagination of the audience as a sexually inhibited young woman whose perceptiveness and intelligence are of an extraordinary brilliance. Cassandra and Helen stand out as the characters that hold most appeal for a modern audience. Helen's situation is also distinguished by the fact that she is the only woman targeted by the Trojan women themselves for hatred and condemnation. They accuse her of being the cause of the war that has brought death to all the Trojan warrior heroes and has culminated in the downfall of Troy itself. She is also considered to be the bane of her own kinsmen—the Greeks.

In the eyes of the Trojan women, including Hecabe, Helen lacks “womanly virtues” and is completely bereft of refined sentiments. Her renowned beauty is a snare that she calculatingly and opportunistically utilises to manipulate men like Paris in her insatiable quest for sensual pleasures and luxurious living.

Helen, challenging Hecabe's view and defending herself, traces, in a manner that would have seemed logical to Athenian theatre audiences of the day, the source of the calamity in the whims and fancies of headstrong and capricious gods and goddesses. Anyway, it is significant that in doing so she blames the goddess of sexual love—Aphrodite—for her own elopement with Paris. Of course, Helen's claim is in accordance with the mythological sources from which Euripides drew his material—but this does not necessarily prevent the modern spectator from concluding that Helen is justifying her elopement with Paris on the basis of having fallen in love with him:

Helen: “The man whether Alexandros or Paris is the name you wish to give him, had a powerful goddess at his side when he came. This was the man you left behind in your home, you worst of husbands and sailed away from Sparta to the land of Crete. So much for that matter. Next I will put a question not to you but to myself. Why was it that I left your house to go away, *quite in my right mind*, with a stranger, betraying my country and home? Punish the goddess and show yourself stronger than Zeus, who rules over the rest of the gods, but is that lady's slave; the blame is not mine (emphasis added).

Chorus leader: ... “She speaks with fair words from a foul heart; now

that inspires fear.”

We see Hecabe herself though in a different context admitting the power of sexual love:

Hecabe: “There is no lover who does not love forever.”

The Helen we see in Bandaranayaka's production of *The Trojan Women* strikes a chord of deep sympathy within the modern spectator through her honest and faithful endeavour to understand herself. Due to this the spectator also comes to recognise in Helen a precursor of many a tragic heroine portrayed in modern literature—especially in the classical novel—who, due to sexual love outside wedlock, is prompted to turn her back on the institution. That Helen had not been happy in her marriage to Menelaus is revealed not only by what she says, but also by the male chauvinistic and over-bearing attitudinising of Menelaus when he meets her outside the women prisoners' camp.

It is clear Helen has not been happy in Troy either—especially during the years Troy has been under siege by invading Greeks. Helen, when she appears in front of the women prisoners' camp, seems not only estranged from the Trojan women, she is also rather aloof from the destruction wrought on the Trojans by the invaders. The fact that her attire is different from that of the other women prisoners shows that she is being treated deferentially by the Greek soldiers. Although Hecabe pounces on the fact that Helen is “showily” attired as further proof of her moral laxity, the audience, which learns that Helen had been forcibly taken in marriage by another Trojan leader after Paris's death, realises the absurdity of Hecabe's accusation. In the eyes of the spectator, Helen remains a woman who manages to keep her head high in spite of trying, painful and difficult circumstances.

It is clearly with the intention of bringing the play closer to the present-day Sri Lankan audience that Bandaranayaka has incorporated a group of soldiers dressed in Sri Lankan armed force camouflage uniforms into the play. These soldiers act as a part of the Greek army and are shown harassing the women prisoners. The prisoners, while justifiably denouncing the invaders, also highly praise the merits of laying down one's life for the sake of the motherland.

In a context where Bandaranayaka has included soldiers dressed in Sri Lankan army uniforms those declarations can all too easily be interpreted as a defence of the program of national separatism.

The remarkable success of Bandaranayaka's production is due not only to the fact that it powerfully conveys the essential content of Euripides' work, but also because the staging satisfactorily accomplishes the difficult task of generating in the minds of the spectators the mood and atmosphere contained in the original play.

This success is due in large measure to the fact that Bandaranayaka has been sensitive to something that had to be taken into consideration if a play like the *The Trojan Women*, which belongs to the Western classical tradition of drama, was to be successfully staged in a country like Sri Lanka. He sought the cooperation of actors and actresses as well as theatre technicians with a knowledge of the latter tradition. In other words, the director has engaged artistic personnel from Western-style theatre groups in Sri Lanka to complement the creative dramatic talent of the Sinhala theatre. In Bandaranayaka's production of *The Trojan Women*, the choreography of Jerome L. de Silva has contributed much to the success of the production.

Bandaranayaka was judicious in the selection of the cast too, and all the actors and actresses—some from the Western-style theatre—perform their respective roles with keen artistic comprehension of the individual characters as well as of the particular situation portrayed in the play.

Special mention should be made of Meena Kumari Perera who kept the audience almost spell-bound with her Cassandra—clearly a challenging and exhausting role, lucidly and exhilaratingly performed. Her performance reveals an artistic sensibility that demands recognition.

Jehan Aloysius' Menelaus also deserves mention. Aloysius, in the

magnificent robes of a Greek aristocrat keeping up the regal mien, managed to reveal the essential weaknesses of the character too: a man whose craving for a woman provided neither the loving understanding nor the social protection she longed for. Junita Beling's rather low-keyed performance as Helen provided an attractive contrast to the other female characters.

The music is by Rukantha Gunathilake, and here too it is clear that Bandaranayaka has scored with his willingness to break new ground.

The Trojan Women has been criticised as too loosely knit and lacking cohesion. The action takes place entirely in the camp where the women prisoners are kept. Soldiers and messengers continuously arrive with messages and tidings from the Greek camp and the council of war being held there. The audience is made to understand that the Greek ships are ready to set sail for home. The action more or less consists in the women, one by one, being taken to the enemy ships. Therefore the very structure of the play gives it the appearance of a string of episodes, each coloured by the specific personality of the woman prisoner who figures prominently in it.

It should be emphasised that the structure in no way detracts from the basic unity of the play, which lies in its main theme: the devastation created by war in the lives of women and children.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact