

Writ of Habeas Corpus: Christine Evans's *Trojan Barbie*

By
Robert
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Photo 1: Lotte checks her supplies of doll parts before her trip to Troy.

Photo: Michael Lutch, American Repertory Theatre

Christine Evans' work is attracting attention wherever it is seen, and her influence as a strong and insistent voice in new playwriting is growing exponentially. Her plays never leave you alone. Once seen (or even read) their hold on an awakened imagination is persistent and unshakable. *Trojan Barbie* is a powerful recent script, and it fits into an emerging quiltwork of serious and deep plays that, collectively, are already gathering the awesome strength of an *œuvre*. Christine herself has stated that one of her artistic objectives is projecting "a dream with a hard core of truth inside it." Her steady productivity has won her loyal admirers, and she serves as an exemplar and inspiration to younger writers who study playwriting with her.

Her characteristic locus (the setting of her plays) is a liminal space, a tough hard "in-between" domain of the moral imagination where urgent contemporary cultural work needs to be done. An earlier play of hers, set in an immigrant detention center in her native Australia (*Slow Falling Bird*), provides an image of lasting value in understanding all her work to date. In that play, a child hesitates to be born, balking at incarnation into the world the rest of us have prepared for it. In *Trojan Barbie*, a haunting inversion of this poetic figure takes the form of dead souls (Euripides' captive Trojan women) who cannot leave a place of outrage and grief. Wherever Ms. Evans' sbold poetic dramaturgy takes us—a desolate beach (*All Souls' Day*), the concrete limbo of an urban highway underpass (*Pussy Boy*), or—and this is a recurring "place" for her drama—a dread-filled "camp" or refuge collection center in a war zone (*Mothergun*, *Trojan Barbie*)—the steady traffic between the living and the dead, the present sufferers and the incipient souls of our future, occupies her

mind and ours. Christine's recent work turns the stage into a sort of psychic processing center. Within that space her characteristic procedure is a fearless forward-writing, a steady unflinching advance into states of soul where instinctive recoil usually prevails over facing hard facts head on. Christine Evans' great gift is her steady, even-handed ability to explore rationally, without panic or revulsion, the awful consequences of inflicted suffering.

Given the shock of the daily brutalities of our world, it is almost a vacation of the mind to jump-cut to the Trojan War, so comfortably familiar to us from our long bookshelves of Classics. Homer's two great epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, lay down the basic material of the Trojan legend, and these versions date roughly from the ninth century before the Common Era (BCE). Even in their own time, these great Homeric poems were treating of long-past events. Modern archaeology at the site of ancient Troy sets the reality of the original Trojan War at around 1200 BCE. So by the time our ancient Greek tragic playwrights (Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides) were handling these tales in "fifth-century" Athens, they were harking back to events already

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seven centuries in the past. We recall these same events with two and a half thousand more years between us and, say, Euripides' *Trojan Women*.

Trojan Barbie began, in Christine's mind, when she was asked to turn her attention to Euripides's *Trojan Women*. Here she found a kindred spirit: a playwright and poet who reawakened his public's consciousness to the "in-between" victims—chiefly women and children—of a devastating war. Euripides' play features those caught between two states, transitioning from "normality" and peace to a new status as brutalized prisoners of war and enslaved human chattel. Strikingly, his play shifted public attention in 415 BCE from the heroics of victorious warriors to the shameful maltreatment of their brutalized victims. Euripides forced an accounting which the heroic tradition was not used to providing. His play was like a writ of *habeas corpus*: a demand that the bodies be produced and that they be accounted for. This is where Christine Evans drew her inspiration from her Athenian predecessor. Her title tips its hat to her deep ethical source in Euripides, and Trojan Hecuba reappears, resurgent now in the 21st century, and unabated in her grief, to reclaim her place (and her ravaged babies) on the contemporary stage.

If the most violent man in ancient Greece, the hero Achilles, has been remembered endlessly since his probable "real" death at the walls of Troy, he has been offset doggedly since Euripides's time by the tragic figure of Hecuba, most aggrieved of all victims of vindictive violence. One of the ways Achilles was remembered, for instance, very soon after his death was by his hot-headed son, Pyrrhus, who slaughtered not only Hecuba's royal husband, Priam, but also Hecuba's youngest daughter, the Trojan virgin Polyxena, by cutting her throat over his warrior-father's tomb. The wholesale reprisal-murder of the innocent, and the rape and enslavement of those who were "spared" immediate violent death, can never be forgotten wherever and whenever it happens. Hecuba became in antiquity the epitome of human grief, transfixing attention generation after generation as the subject of the cruelest reversal of fortune imaginable: a queen reduced to slavery, a mother of princes and princesses forced to witness the violent and sadistic death and defilement of all her children and grandchildren. Ovid, when his turn came to memorialize her (several centuries after Euripides), metamorphosed her into the eternal barking of a tortured dog, mad with pain, haunting forever the shores of the Hellespont—perennial border between East and West. Hecuba holds her own against any number of exalted heroes in the long literary memory of the Western Tradition.

Many theatre-goers will remember Hamlet's line, "What's he to Hecuba or Hecuba to him that he should weep for her?" Hamlet is referring to a scene Shakespeare, a millennium and a half after Ovid, inserted into the already large bulk of *Hamlet*—a scene that is usually cut in modern productions. But it is worth pausing over the interpolated scene here, for it is another instance of a poet taking deliberate trouble to remember Hecuba. In *Hamlet*, the players who have just shown up at Elsinore have in their stock repertory a scene (written in a crude and bombastic rhetorical doggerel) "re-enacting" the slaughter of King Priam before the eyes of his horrified wife, Hecuba. The

enraged murderer is Achilles's son, the same Pyrrhus who, in the myth and perhaps in the fictional player's play, can be expected next to murder Polyxena before her mother can protect her. The mere act of reciting this tragic mayhem brings tears (within the play) to the nameless actor's eyes. It was *conventional* in Shakespeare's time to weep while performing this story, and any good professional knew to do so. Hamlet's Hecuba was embedded deep in the cultural memory of Elizabethan England. The immediate path of transmission (for Shakespeare) was probably threefold: Virgil's vivid narrative of the fall of Troy in book II of the *Aeneid*, Ovid's superb verse narrative of Polyxena's brave death, (*Metamorphoses* Book XIII) and Seneca's portrayal of Hecuba's suffering in his Latin play *Troades*. All three texts were staples in Elizabethan grammar schools. In Seneca—a version written a generation after Ovid—Seneca has Pyrrhus say during a heated argument over murdering Polyxena, "Since when is it wrong to immolate virgins?...Victors have the right to do whatever they please." It would be nice if this brutal sentiment, uttered so starkly onstage in the Emperor Nero's time, were out of date.

And so layer upon layer, in one "age" after another, the need recurs to recall and retell this paradigmatic tale of pitilessly inflicted woes. A visitor to any archaeological dig is invited by what she sees there to dream her way back to the layers of history being peeled back by the action of digging.

We all seem nowadays condemned to gnaw endlessly on hard and indigestible moral materials dished out by the relentless unfolding of real events. Whether we acknowledge it or not, we have experienced a ceaseless erosion of conscience and peace of mind over news of Bosnian rape camps, atrocities in Kosovo, ethnic cleansings and genocidal massacres in Rwanda and Darfur, nightmarish abuses at Abu Graib and Guantanamo, the specter of child warriors in Africa, and more recently the indiscriminate assault on civilians in Fallujah and in Gaza. Brutalities abound everywhere, and Christine Evans has used her art to do something about it. *Trojan Barbie* digs its way through a mounting backlog of unsorted psychic aches that accompany the distress and disruption of what used to be called "normal" life. The buried layers of Troy are still yielding up bodies clamoring to be accounted for. So are events in our own time. The principle of *habeas corpus* demands that *someone* produce the bodies, account for them, bring them forth—alive if possible—but one way or another, bring them forth to be counted and acknowledged, to be cared for and healed, if that is still possible, to be decently buried in peace if all else fails.

We need, in such circumstances as ours, a strong and serious theatre, a theatre of inspired images and steady moral excavation—in short Christine Evans' theatre. It is not often nowadays that a play seeks to chart a path and suggest a method by which our overtaxed and overextended moral muscles may "workshop" intractable materials. Christine's plays are not squeamish, but they are not brutally confrontational, either. They are *poietic*, in the ancient Greek sense: *constructed* for us out of indigestible raw materials blent with an acute esthetic and moral consciousness which accords—here in the magic sphere of the stage—a decent space in which to breathe and work: something "reality" can no longer be casually counted on to afford us.

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