

Theatre: **The Critics**

# Almeida's Greek season kicks off in style

An oh-so-Islington re-staging of Aeschylus's classic tragedy proves a perfect blend of old and new, says **Shyama Perera**

**ORESTEIA**

**ALMEIDA**

★★★★☆

What a relief to move from modern Greek tragedy to ancient as the Almeida kicks off its Greeks season with some glorious bloodletting, all the more exciting for being staged on a modern set straight out of World of Interiors. Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is three short plays featuring the usual suspects of Greek tragedy: filicide, mariticide, matricide, and mattressicide (a new word coined by me for the murder of a mistress).

Our main players are the King of Mycenae, Agememnon, his wife Clytemnestra, and their children Iphigenia, Electra, and Orestes. We also have the psychic mute, Cassandra, who

Clytemnestra believes is her husband's concubine. By this point, it's not the sexual nature of their relationship that vexes her so much as the prospect of him having any personal pleasure after sacrificing Iphigenia to win a war.

Familial relations are never easy in ancient Greece and this crew – cleverly updated by director Robert Icke – have the added tension of an English sensibility. The look and feel is pure Islington – sliding and stone-blasted interior glass, and a king and consort understated in silk bathrobes and elegantly cut High Street designer wear. Suffering is not expressed but borne. Until people snap. Then we have truly chilling, thrilling, theatre.

The big excitement is the casting of Downton Abbey's Jessica Brown Findlay as Electra, but she's invisible



■ Angus Wright and Lia Williams in *Oresteia*. Picture: Manuel Harlan

alongside the brilliant Luke Thompson as Orestes who comes into his own at the end in full technicolor, and a superb Iphigenia played on press night by Clara Read.

As Agememnon, the vulpine Angus Wright feels wrong, but

he's utterly compelling. He constantly draws the eye and his inner turmoil following the decision to murder his daughter, is palpable. Lia Williams does a star turn as Clytemnestra – rigid with stiff upper-lipped control until the rage emerges in a murderous howl.

At three hours forty minutes it

feels too long. A fourth play has been added to the original and though it all happens at a lick, it drags at the beginning and palls in the last 30 minutes. The audience is timed and the doors shut and lights down as the clock hits zero – it's worth taking water.

**Shyama Perera**

## Davro rallies the crowds in throwback table tennis tale

**NOT A GAME FOR BOYS**

**KING'S HEAD THEATRE**

★★★★☆

The (increasingly) immortal Barry Cryer says that great comedies are about character and failure. He'd definitely like *Not a Game for Boys*.

Three cabbies from north London are well drawn – baby faced Tony (Oliver Joel) riddled with uncertainties; the knowing, brutally honest, lone wolf Oscar (Alan Drake); and Eric (Bobby Davro), the alpha male of the trio, a sergeant major with domestic and personal demons.

Davro attracted a fair-sized personal following to the King's Head on the opening night of this revival of Simon Block's 1995 work.

The scene is the changing room at a down-at-heel table tennis club. Oscar has attended the underwhelming funeral of Fat Derek, another ping pong player, who dropped dead ("The breeze as he went down rustled my Evening Standard") mid-serve. It has prompted him to question the point of competitive play as he enters his 50s.

The dialogue is delivered at the pace of a thrilling table tennis rally: pithy observations compete with lengthy, troubling telephone asides as Eric deals with wife Elaine, in turn dealing with the challenges of his demented old mum.

Tony shares his guilt about an assignation he has had with a



■ Bobby Davro

fare in the back of his cab (Up the Aldwych). No sympathy from Oscar; just plain condemnation.

Ping pong is the only space left for Eric that is not his hell at home or the coffin of his cab. To stop playing would be as good as death. His pleading with Oscar not to throw the match, and watching a proud man beg, is a great moment of theatre.

All three actors are terrific but the real star is the dialogue, a style that can be traced from the black humour of WWI trenches, via radio comedies like Hancock and Steptoe to Ronnie Barker's Fletcher. Fast, funny and intelligent.

You have until July 5 to get along to spend 85 fast and furious minutes at the King's Head.

**David Winskill**



■ Below: Alistair McGowan in *An Audience With Jimmy Savile*. Pictures: Helen Maybanks

## Savile victims honoured in chilling story

**AN AUDIENCE WITH JIMMY SAVILE PARK THEATRE**

★★★★☆

How did he get away with it? That's the question Jonathan Maitland's controversial new play addresses, juxtaposing national treasure Sir Jimmy Savile, feted by monarchs, prime ministers and cardinals, with the thuggish serial abuser. Savile's cheeky asides – the knighthood "got me off the hook!" – gain a chilling double meaning with hindsight.

Maitland's respectful docudrama, set in 1991, blends real witness statements and transcripts with imagined scenes. Savile is being honoured on a *This Is Your Life*-style show, but while he boasts of improving lives, we see evidence to the contrary – Lucy, a fictional amalgam of several victims, was raped by Savile aged 12 while in hospital. Leah Whitaker's Lucy is heartbreakingly vulnerable

recalling the attack: too young to understand what was happening until it was too late.

Maitland confronts the culture that facilitated Savile's crimes; while monstrous, he wasn't the lone devil we might prefer. The BBC protected its "man of the people" asset, police officers buried complaints, and hospital administrators gave the generous celebrity free rein. It's a salutary reminder that such atrocities could recur without serious institutional and legal reform.

Alistair McGowan embodies Savile with unnerving skill, donning not just shiny tracksuit, cigar and deliberate verbal tics, but also the nasty shrewdness of the master manipulator: in public, lowering our defences with quirky charm; in private, flaunting knowledge of libel law, belittling accusers in brutally misogynistic terms, and twisting Catholic doctrine to claim his good deeds cancel out the bad.

Maitland's play and Brendan

O'Hea's perfunctory production offer little new information, and the underdeveloped fictional subplot feels generic. But, with strong supporting turns from Graham Seed, Charlotte Page and Robert Perkins, this is a well-intentioned attempt to honour the victims' story, untold for far too long.

**Marianka Swain**

