

When Nobody Returns

by Brian Woolland

Performed by Border Crossings (UK) and Ashtar Theatre (Palestine)
at the Theatre Bay, Acklam Village, London, UK
21st October – 6th November 2016

Reviewed by Guy Williams

Picking my way through the back streets of West London in the shadow of the Westway, as market stallholders packed up for the day, there was a feeling of being on some kind of quest. Finding the venue was an exciting prelude to experiencing Brian Woolland's epic new play, *When Nobody Returns*. The theatre, an arch below the elevated dual carriageway, alongside the overground section of the Hammersmith and City Line was protected from the elements by heavy curtains. The audience was thus prepared for discomfort. The unsettling surroundings attuned us to an event that was to challenge our views of Homer's *The Odyssey*, of all soldiers returning from war and of the condition of Palestinians living under siege. This was an opportunity to see both of Woolland's most recent plays (*This Flesh is Mine* is reviewed in Volume 30, Issue 2) in a double bill and a chance to compare these provocative and beautiful companion pieces.

Why *When Nobody Returns*? In Homer's *The Odyssey*, Odysseus and his men land on the island of the Cyclopes during their journey home from the Trojan War. They enter a cave filled with provisions, which did they but know it, belonged to the giant cyclops Polyphemus. When he returns home with his sheep, he blocks the entrance with a huge stone and eats two of the men. Next morning, the giant kills and eats two more and leaves the cave to graze his sheep. That evening when he returns and eats two more of the men, Odysseus offers Polyphemus some strong wine. Drunk and unwary, the giant asks Odysseus his name. Odysseus tells him 'Nobody' and Polyphemus promises to eat this 'Nobody' last of all. While he is asleep, Odysseus drives a hardened wooden stake into Polyphemus' eye. When Polyphemus shouts for help from his fellow giants, saying that 'Nobody' has hurt him, they think Polyphemus is being afflicted by divine power and recommend prayer as the answer. Thus, Odysseus is, as the legends have it, a trickster and a story teller. There is also a mythology around him. Ten years after the end of the Trojan War, and twenty since he left his home in Ithaka, no-one at home knows the truth about him. His people, his wife, Penelope and his son Telémakhos don't know where or how he is. He is the Nobody of the title, who slips back into his homeland in disguise.

There is a delightful series of scenes within the play between Telémakhos and his father-figure, Menelaus in which this story (and others) is retold by a drunken Telémakhos.

In his illuminating programme notes, which include reflections on his workshops with teachers from Palestine, Woolland observes:

I hadn't realised how many young men in Palestine grow up with stories about their absent fathers. Some of these stories are true, some are wild exaggerations, and some are simply lies. But whatever the status of the stories, they have profound effects on the listeners...

Of course, Odysseus is the only Greek survivor of the war. Many were killed at Troy and those who survived died on the way home – most drowned at sea by a vengeful Poseidon. For those waiting at home, nobody would return and they would be left to mourn lost sons, brothers, fathers and lovers.

There is another possible interpretation of the title: again in his programme notes, Woolland refers to workshops with young people from military families. They comment that Odysseus cannot return home until he has come to terms with a sense of guilt for the atrocities in which he has been involved. One young person says:

He doesn't want to bring the war back to his family.

Perhaps the person who returns is not the same as the one who left.

The Odysseus we are striving to create... is a character who has been traumatised and profoundly destabilised by the experience of war, a man who yearns for home, but is terrified he won't be able to cope with domesticity; who is desperate to be reunited with his wife and son, but riddled with self-doubt and fearful that his very presence will destroy them.

The play is a thought-provoking exploration of the metaphor suggested by its title, and works on a satisfying number of levels. It is as much a play about *The Odyssey* as it is about all soldiers returning from war, and as it is about the condition of the people of Palestine. It is a play about occupation and fathers and their stories. Like *This Flesh is Mine*, it is rooted in an ancient story that constantly references our world – a claustrophobic world of containment, where Penelope is banned from singing as her voice is deemed provocative to the occupying forces. We see a world of checkpoints and machine-guns, where the occupied are denied freedom of movement even to the extent of being denied time on the beach. And the two worlds, then and now, here and there, inform and illuminate one another in a way that is testament to the playwright's skills.

In the opening scene, Telémakhos rages against his mother, Penelope, as she weaves a tapestry:

And what would you have me do while I wait, mother?

Lie in bed and grow fat,

daydreaming of the time when we can call our land our own?

Or would you rather I stood and watched for his ship

while generations of seabirds make their nests in the cliffs

and teach their young to fly? ...

If he hungers for home as you yearn for him,
why is he not here?

The language is poetic, the images evocative and the frustration of a young man desperate to take action burns through them. He wants to save his homeland, he wants to find his father, he wants to know what has happened to him – actually, he appears to want to be him. And this very human characterisation draws us in as his mother checks and blocks him, protecting him from the world and from himself. The tension between them drives the action forward and provides a heartbeat that underscores the action. Ultimately, inevitably, this angry son kills the father and the play ends with him cradling his father's body, sobbing.

And just as the character motivations of the mother and son work in counterpoint, so is the theme of sex poised against that of war and death. We are constantly aware of the sexual tension that percolates through the relationships. The mother who wants her son to be her husband who pushes her husband away when she first sees him when he returns telling him to take a bath – he smells of goat. The father who has a relationship with a woman who is the same age as his son. The son who kills his own lover at the, (perhaps) unwitting prompting of his father. Sex and death are inextricably interwoven – the most profound, human values contaminated by war and its aftermath.

The production captured much of the play's power and beauty. Penelope's tapestry is a central, holding image. Ostensibly a shroud for Odysseus' aging father – in reality a defence against the suitors of the invading force (she declares she will choose a suitor once her work is done and embroiders all day, unpicking her work at night), it ultimately transforms into Odysseus' final resting place. Created by Helen Cams, this was an object that provided the focus for the dramatic action and captured both the skill of the weaver and the necessity for it to be a barrier to the advances of men.

The set complemented the modern urban environment in which it was staged. The audience was placed within it, all intimately involved, as the action unfolded around us. Evocations of Ancient Greece and modern day Gaza were interwoven. A platform holding armed guards as they watched over us, patrolling the checkpoints, was also the place from which the ghosts of the past can speak – combined with the very real rumbling of traffic and trains overhead to create a real sense of being trapped in an underworld.

Playing the piece with British and Palestinian actors was a master-stroke. The blending of Border Crossings and Ashtar Theatre created a concrete dimension that elevated the play to a significant world event – the resonances were profound.

I watched the play on its second night and perhaps that was what led to my only reservation about the production. My guess is that there may also have been a cultural tension between the two acting traditions. The relationship between Telémakhos and Penelope is crucial. There needs to be an ambiguity that has to be played with great subtlety. On the night, Tariq Jordan's (Telémakhos) performance was overplayed as a petulant, immature teenager. Iman Aoun (Penelope) responded maternally. Andrew French's (Odysseus) relationship with Bayan Shbib (Calypso and Melantho) was rough and stilted. What was lost in these exchanges was the sensuality and intimacy that the script demands.

However, like *This Flesh is Mine, When Nobody Returns* is a modern classic. The risk and courage that this production represents is to be applauded long and hard. These are highly significant pieces that need to be experienced by as wide an audience as possible. Woolland is a modern, theatrical genius.