

*Next to Normal: An Interior Oresteia*

This paper presents the case that Tony- and Pulitzer Prize-winning musical *Next to Normal* can be profitably studied alongside the *Oresteia* as monumental works with parallel themes and resonant similarities. After making the case for a connection between the two works, the paper will conclude with a discussion of the ways in which a few substantial differences reveal how the characteristic viewpoints of Classical Athens and 21<sup>st</sup>-century America diverge. Whereas the *Oresteia* is primarily externally-focused, *Next to Normal* is oriented towards internal conflicts.

*Next to Normal* focuses on the suburban Goodman family coping with mother Diana's bipolar disorder. Husband Dan, daughter Natalie, and son Gabe try to support her as she deals with treatments but are overwhelmed by their own problems and anxieties. Eventually we come to learn that Gabe died 15 years earlier and only exists as part of Diana's psychosis. That illness seems to have been triggered by Gabe's death and by Dan's attempts to ignore dealing with it. Teenage Natalie, largely ignored, experiments with drugs and is soon trapped in her own addiction and dysfunction. Despite doctors' best attempts to control Diana's hallucinations, Gabe always returns to torment Diana until finally she refuses treatment and leaves her Dan. Rather than leave with Diana, Gabe remains tied to the house and to his father.

Despite substantial differences in the plot, both *Next to Normal* and the *Oresteia* deal with the problems of a single family as it echoes through the generations. Like the curse of the house of Atreus, Diana's mental illness appears inherited from her mother, and seems to be passed on to her daughter. Indeed, the tense relationships between mother, son and daughter build on a tradition that spans from Aeschylus and Sophocles through to *Morning Becomes*

*Electra*. Like O'Neill's Aeschylean adaptation, *Next to Normal*'s family dynamics are shaped by Freudian theory (Ross 2010).

The characters of Gabe and the Furies play similar roles, terrifying representations of mental illness, visible only to some characters on stage, but not entirely monstrous; both Gabe and the Furies ultimately crave recognition and prove understandable and almost sympathetic. Gabe in fact acts as both Iphigenia and Fury in one, victim and avenger.

Both works also use double-casting to help create dramatic effect. The *Oresteia* made meaning from the same actor playing Cassandra, Pylades, the Pythia and Apollo (Marshall 2003); Apollo speaks with one voice in Aeschylus' trilogy. In a similar vein, a single actor plays both doctors who try to heal Diana, giving the medical community a single, interchangeable face. Finally, both dramas are visually dominated by the house itself. The house of Atreus sets the scene for the first two plays of the *Oresteia* and is given increased importance as Cassandra's monologue makes it the familial curse's physical manifestation. Mark Wendland's set design for *Next to Normal* presents a cross-section of a modern, multi-story home and Dan draws audience attention to the house in the songs "Light in the Dark" and "Better than before."

Seen another way, however, the set design also helps reveal one of the most striking differences between the two works. The audience (and the chorus) remain outside the house of Atreus, focused on the family's relationship with the outside world (the kingdom of Argos and its citizens). The interior space is out of reach. In *Next to Normal*, almost all action takes place inside the house, which is visible to the audience. Moreover, when the upper stories are occasionally blocked off, the panels which cover them reveal a woman's eyes, suggesting an overlap between the house and Diana's mind. We are given full access to Diana's interiority and the play seems to enact Benjamin's (2002) "phantasmagoria of the interior."

This shift from exteriority to interiority also helps illuminate the plays' divergent endings. The *Oresteia*'s ending is a triumph for society at large, as the Furies are integrated into productive legal society. Although *Next to Normal*'s finale "Light" promises some hope as Natalie helps Dan confront Gabe and the mental illness he represents, Diana only escapes by removing herself from the house, the physical embodiment of her interiority, her own sanity. The doctors are no Apollo; society can be healed, but the psyche cannot. Diana can live only by rejecting her own interior world, escaping the house (and the confines of alleged mental health). Clytemnestra might have escaped the curse, we learn. But not if she lives trapped within the house of Atreus.

#### Bibliography

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