

Introduction to the two plays 'Suture' (Kopnaad) and 'Mind the Gap' by Stefan Hertmans

Both plays ('Suture' and 'Mind the Gap') by the Flemish poet, writer and playwright are embedded in the post-modernist contemporary drama tradition.

In the case of 'Mind the Gap' the tradition of the Greek tragedy confronts the different philosophical and theatre ideas, as represented for instance by the German dramatist Heiner Müller. Different famous thinkers and authors in the line of the same Western tradition – Hölderlin, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Heidegger and Brecht - re-read and changed the Greek Tragedy in a radical manner. Their influence is reflected also in 'Suture'. Stefan Hertmans is connected artistically and philosophically with these German philosophers and psychoanalysts.

'Suture' (Kopnaad) is a theatre text for four voices – two men and two women. Their monologues show the different divisions and gaps in one's existence. It treats the division of Europe since Jalta, its working title was 'The European Cleavage'. 'Suture' (Kopnaad – being a non-existent word) refers to the head's suture, which in some cases does not close and remains an opening, a gap. 'Gap' is the key-word in both plays. The gap between the classical antiquity and modern times, the gap between reason and emotion, life and death, between sensitivity and lack of it, between speechless and talking, between madness and normality.

'Mind the Gap' elaborates further on the theme of the gap - the gaps in our daily life, our thinking and our feelings. The play is built around the tragedies of three well-known heroines from the Greek Tragedy – Antigone, Clytemnestra and Medea but is written after Stefan Hertmans spoke to Bosnian women. His engagement with the events on the Balkan is reflected in many of his essays and articles. The world of 'Mind the Gap' is a world of mourning, of distorted family relations, of the devastating effect of revenge and greed for power. Wars, rape, incest, natural disasters and influx of refugees – the story repeats itself times and again. The main personages, the three women Antigone, Clytemnestra and Medea dare at a certain moment to say 'no' to the laws of the man's world and the effect of those laws on their lives. In three consecutive monologues Antigone, Clytemnestra and Medea reveal their tragic fates and the strength of their characters. What unites their fates is the question of guilt and punishment. Who is the slaughtered, who is the slaughterer? All three try to reclaim the moral balance in a world which although 2500 years ago still has similarities to the present-day imbalances.

The world in both plays is one of universal malaise where the public or the reader feels through the strong, sensitive, exquisite language how it feels to be betrayed in love, to be lonely in speechlessness, to be inconsolable in anger. But also – what is the price one pays for high principles.

The texts in the plays are complex, multi-layered and require deep knowledge of the context on Greek and Western tradition and its playwrights, linguists and philosophers, including Derrida and Julia Kristeva.

Both plays have been staged – in Belgium, The Netherlands and Germany.