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Review of 'Ashurbanipal: The Last Great King of Assyria'

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Ancient Assyrian monarchs, heavy metal music, and dramatic theatre may not be a typical combination, but this is what viewers were presented with in 'Ashurbanipal: The Last Great King of Assyria'. The play, which was performed five times in the Simpkins Lee Theatre in Oxford's Lady Margaret Hall from the 15th to the 18th of May, was consciously very unorthodox on a number of levels. Director Thomas Stell had his actors play out the story of a two and a half millennia old courtly drama and fraternal feud while wearing heavy makeup and stark, stylised black-and-white costumes. Ashurbanipal himself was played from behind a mask. The motions of the actors were stiff and very unnatural, rather effectively conveying the sense of figures from Assyrian wall friezes come to life. The sequences of heavy metal music, sometimes accompanied by voiceovers, served to highlight particularly visual scenes and transitions, adding a very distinctive aural element to an already striking play.¹

At the centre of all this strangeness is the script by Selena Wisnom, which, as the title promises, tells the story of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria (northern Iraq) in the 7th century BC. The play, based on a number of genuine historical sources as well as creative filling in of gaps in the record, takes place in the later stages of a long war between Ashurbanipal and his elder brother, the ruler of Babylon (the year, we read in our programs, is 648 BC). The plot revolves on the one hand around Ashurbanipal's implacable hatred for his brother and desire to gain a definitive victory in the war, and on the other around the intrigues of his own court and the advisors and family members who feel increasingly alienated by the king's single-minded pursuit of the war. In some ways this setting, filled with unfamiliar names and customs, is as striking and exotic as the staging choices, but at its heart 'The Last Great King of Assyria' is about emotions and relationships. There is a human dimension to Ashurbanipal's insufferableness—his intelligence, cleverness, and

1 A sample of the music, released as part of the promotion of the play before its performance, may be found online at the time of publication at <https://soundcloud.com/theforgebreaker/ashurbanipal-apkallu-ii>

scholarship easily win the admiration of both his court and the audience, while his imperiousness is frustrating in equal measures to both—that shines through the distance of years and the stilted motions of the actors.

This is one of the play's great strengths: to take the unusual and strange and make it understandable and even familiar. We quickly come to see the world through Assyrian eyes: Babylon to the south, with its ancience and cultural prestige; Lebanon to the west, a wild land of cedars; Medes and other strange people in uncertain lands to the east. The script and costuming work together to distinguish and characterise the main cast of characters. We are not overwhelmed with what easily could have been a confusing babble of names; instead we meet (for instance) Ashurbanipal's sister as a sensual and sarcastic figure, who sashays and lounges in sharp contrast to the statuesque motions usual in the play. By the end of the evening we have gotten to know her, and find it easy to remember that her name is Sherua-etirat.

Some of the richest moments in 'The Last Great King of Assyria' deftly combine characterisation with education. In one scene near the beginning, Ashurbanipal rails against his brother, the king of Babylon, for attacking Assyria and breaking the treaties that they had made. He ends by saying that 'he smashed the tablet containing his oath, as if he thought the gods had made no copy', which at once memorably conveys something of the cultural role of cuneiform tablets, and demonstrates the nature of Ashurbanipal's anger: he is convinced that he is right in a very legal sense in the war, and that there is the documentation to prove it. A short while later, we see another facet of the king's character in a scene where Ashurbanipal and his chief scholar Balasi debate the meanings of astrological omens and portents (the divinations themselves were presented just before in one of the play's heavy metal interludes). Balasi, the kindly, wise old sage and Ashurbanipal's teacher, tries to interpret each omen as speaking against continued war, and he argues that a cracked corona which has been seen around the sun symbolises a fracture in the gods' protection of the king. The king responds energetically and pedantically, citing ancient texts from memory to conclude that Balasi's interpretation is wrong, and that the corona is instead a sign of Babylon's weak defences. In a single stroke, this one interchange illustrates the deep importance of divination

(evident at many other points as well), the rich textual tradition inherited by Assyria, Ashurbanipal's own proud (if not arrogant) scholarly abilities, and his determination to bring everything back around to war and assault against Babylon and his brother. It also provides a nice moment of linguistic revelry which will appeal to anyone familiar with problems of textual philology and the slippery meanings of words in ancient texts.

'Ashurbanipal' is probably not a play for everyone. Some, I am sure, may be put off by the heavy metal score, which is often driving and contains some rough vocals (including one of the final pieces, in which Lord Byron's 'The Destruction of Sennacherib' is growled out over the closing action of the drama). Others may find the subject matter too esoteric, or lacking 'relevance' to modern life—though one might wonder how an exploration of the personal dimensions of power could be anything but relevant. But anyone willing to tolerate a certain amount of strangeness will find a powerful and surprisingly human story in 'Ashurbanipal', and the play provides those with an interest in ancient history or cultures different from their own with a fascinating glimpse of a forgotten world.