

Cumpsty takes Electra-fying performance to Broadway

January 1999, NYC-- The moment Michael Cumpsty treads onto the stage as Orestes in the new production of *Electra*, the tension mounts. There is vengeance to be wrought.

"Orestes wreaks *Electra*'s revenge. Sophocles condenses time and so we never know his exact age," said Cumpsty. "But we know that for him there is no recollection of the place, the people that he encounters and Orestes has no personal experience of the things for which he is seeking vengeance -- but *Electra* has been living in it and is steeped in it. He is a killing machine guided by the gods with no personal experience for his retaliation. It sets up a dramatic dynamic between two people who want the same thing for two different reasons."

It is this dynamic and Cumpsty himself that brought fans to Princeton, New Jersey's McCarter Theatre to see multiple performances and kept chat rooms on the Internet buzzing with rumors of *Electra*'s move to Broadway's Barrymore Theatre on Dec. 3 of last year. *Electra* will close on March 21. Tickets are \$35-\$60.

Electra follows the events set into motion after Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and father of *Electra* and Orestes, sacrificed their sister to appease the gods as he led the Greek fleet into war with Troy. During his absence, Clytemnestra, his wife, took Aegisthus as a lover. Upon Agamemnon's return home from Troy, the lovers assassinated him. Orestes was taken into hiding. *Electra* tormented by the love she has for her dead father, waits for Orestes return and it's subsequent retaliation.

Although costar Zoë Wanamaker received great acclaim for her London performance as *Electra* in 1997, the new American cast members weren't expected to be carbon-copy replications of their British counterparts -- something Cumpsty said he found himself appreciating as he created his own Orestes.

"Zoë and everyone were very careful not to impose everything that they had done in London on this cast. We didn't ever feel that we were under an obligation just to do what had already been done," said Cumpsty. Director David Leveaux along with Wanamaker anchored the Donmar Warehouse production of the drama.

Working with Wanamaker in what may become her signature role has been a remarkable experience, said Cumpsty.

"Zoë is so completely committed to the emotional life of the material," said Cumpsty. "She has the most complete emotional access of any actor I have ever worked with. Watching her as *Electra* can be quite harrowing, actually."

The emotional life of his Orestes, however, is Cumpsty's primary concern.

"There is a point when Orestes says 'I have done well if Apollo spoke the truth,'" said Cumpsty. "As he has no personal experience of those whom he is seeking vengeance I think that is a very telling line. And you wonder where (*Electra* and Orestes') relationship is going: there is a real sadness to the play of an opportunity missed. My feeling is that the enacting of the vengeance separates them forever.

"Although with Sophocles there is no moral judgement, you are left with the feeling of catastrophe," added Cumpsty.

The new version of the classic tragedy may surprise some theatergoers. Cumpsty said the production takes elements from classic and contemporary theatre to create its emotional catharsis and natural characters.