
The Scream

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I was lucky to be in London in May and catch *Fram*, Tony Harrison's latest play,* in its short but spectacular run at the Olivier Theatre at London's National Theatre. The play, all in rhyming verse, begins in Westminster Abbey, with moonlight shining through the stained glass of the great Rose Window, casting a reflection of Aeschylus on the cold stone floor. In walks the ghost of Gilbert Murray (Jeff Rawle), rising up from his grave and carrying a tragic mask.

Murray, the early-twentieth-century Oxford professor and classicist, was also a humanitarian, deeply involved in the League of Nations and the United Nations and co-founder of Oxfam. But since his death fifty years ago, his once-admired verse translations of Aeschylus and Euripides have been scorned, and the world he tried to save has been ravaged by even more unimaginable horrors. So instead of decomposing in his urn, he has spent his afterlife composing this play.

He calls up the spirit of Sybil Thorndike (Sian Thomas, as splendid as the character she plays), the actress who triumphed on the London stage as Clytemnestra, Hecuba, and Medea in Murray's once wildly popular versions, and whisks her off to the Olivier stalls of the National Theatre—for *Fram* is not just a play within a play, but a theater within a theater. Most of all, it is a poem about poetry.

The hero of the play is Fridtjof Nansen (Jasper Britton), Murray's long-ago friend (and admirer of his translations)—the dashing Norwegian scientist, artist, and Arctic explorer

*Tony Harrison, *Fram*. Directed by Tony Harrison and Bob Crowley. National Theatre, London; 10 April–22 May 2008.

Tony Harrison, *Fram* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), 94 pages, £8.99.

who went “Farthest North” in the Arctic in the 1890s:

You’d think a man of his kind, when he headed for the Pole,
would think about the body’s needs and not about the soul,
but Nansen’s shelves of poetry were packed inside his head
when only absolute necessities could be loaded on a sled.

The name of the play is *Fram*, the ship Nansen designed
for his journey north:

fram (“forward” in Norwegian), what Nansen called the craft
he had specially constructed with round hull fore and aft,
so that, when the pack-ice crushed it, it didn’t crack, but rose
and stayed unshattered on top of the ice floes.

Nansen appears, giving a slide show at the Royal Geographical Society. He brought with him on the *Fram* a set of art supplies to capture the magnificent colors of the Aurora Borealis and a phonogram of his wife, Eva, singing a song by Edvard Grieg. When he left the frozen *Fram* to complete his journey on foot, he had to leave the phonogram behind; it sits, forlorn, on the ice-covered stage, playing the sad, scratchy song again and again:

This is my wife’s voice pouring out her soul
fainter and fainter as I struck out for the Pole,
all art, all music, indeed anything refined
left, and maybe left for ever, far, far, far behind,
except for the poems I’d stored up in my mind.

Nansen’s companion on the journey is Hjalmar Johansen (Mark Addy)—“the dark side of his soul.” Johansen gleefully grinds up Nansen’s pastels to fill the kayaks’ holes and constantly reminds him of the dirt, the smells, the claustrophobic cooped-up closeness summed up by the repeated image of the smelly bear-fur blanket they had to share to survive the freezing Arctic nights. Even after his death—by suicide a few years later—Johansen’s ghost continues to pursue and torment Nansen. Throughout the play, he befouls the stage and drags everything down.

Nansen appears again, years later, showing slides; now his slide show is about the Russian famine of 1922. His wife has died and his record for “Farthest North” has long been broken, but he has re-invented himself as a celebrity humanitarian, working for the League of Nations:

My spirit was almost crushed but like the *Fram* in frozen floes,
gripped by despair and darkness, withstood their force, and rose.

As Commissioner for Refugees, he devised a “Nansen passport” for stateless Russian artist émigrés, including Stravinsky, Anna Pavlova, and Chagall. Now the stage becomes a theater, with part of a performance of a ballet with imaginary music, sets, and dance (choreographed by Wayne McGregor and danced ecstatically by Viviana Durante). Next, the stage becomes a meeting in London to discuss the Russian famine, attended by Murray (who raised money for the League of Nations with performances of his translation of *The Trojan Women*, with Sybil in the lead) and Nansen, now the League’s High Commissioner. Also in attendance are Sybil herself, Eglantyne Jebb (Carolyn Pickles) from Save the Children, Ruth Fry (Clare Lawrence) from American Friends, and Sheldon (Patrick Drury), the Chief of Herbert Hoover’s American Relief Administration—who is not impressed:

And this Professor Murray so I’m told’s a drama freak.
Drama would be bad enough but his kind’s ancient Greek!

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Murray’s escorting, as his special lady guest,
some broad called Sybil Thorndike, said to be the best
actress of her generation. God! We’re gonna have to sit
and listen to her declaiming ancient tragic shit.

Murray and Sybil still believe in theater, but the others are all skeptical. They think that only the new media of photography and film will move the public to care about the famine and the war. As Sheldon, one of the Americans, says, “Once you’ve seen the famine you wonder about art!” Murray,

holding the tragic mask, insists that poetry is still the best way to move the world to end the famine:

The tragic mask for me has come to symbolise
the art of facing horror with always-open eyes.
No eyelids on a tragic mask. It has no choice but see
and its mouth is always open to utter poetry.

But when Nansen puts on the mask he lets out a terrible scream:

It reminds me of my countryman Edvard Munch's *The Scream*.

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There's a boat in the background and I think there I am
at the start of my adventure in the departing *Fram*.
It looks like Christiania, but the earth, the sea, the sky
are all vibrating with the violence of the cry.
And since being in the Volga, I have terrifying dreams
of the open mouths of hunger and the open mouths of screams.
In the Volga there are millions of open mouths like these
who need substantial sustenance, not your Euripides.

Suddenly, Sybil steals the show with a stunning solo performance as a starving woman, desperate and driven to eat horse-dung bread and human flesh. It's all language and gesture—all theater—and yet she is absolutely convincing. The horror and the pity are real. She makes her point. And then, just as suddenly, she breaks the spell and sweeps offstage, exclaiming,

I'm starving! I'd enjoy
a little champagne supper across at the Savoy.

Blackout.

At intermission, the audience drank wine and talked about the play on the terrace of the National Theatre on London's South Bank. London's monuments were all illuminated, reflected in the dark waters of the Thames. "It's in *verse*," one woman hissed, outraged. Some drifted away into the lovely

spring night and did not return. And indeed *Fram* is not for the squeamish; it is full of evocations of foul smells, buzzing flies, rotted flesh, cannibalism, horse-dung bread, the horrors of war, famine, despair, and doubt.

Especially doubt. Later, when I read the play (with a photo of one of Nansen's pastels on the cover), I realized that "I don't believe it" is one of its very first lines. All the characters, except Sybil, express doubt. Doubt about the value of art in the face of horror and evil and loss, about the power of language to change the world, about the theater, and about the value of humanism—humanitarianism as well as the humanities—in the face of man's inhumanity to man. As Bertolt Brecht wrote in *To Posterity*,

Ah, what an age it is
 When to speak of trees is almost a crime
 For it is a kind of silence about injustice!

(tr. H. R. Hays)

And yet the splendid spectacle of the production, directed by Harrison and Bob Crowley, serenely affirms the value of art, even as the characters furiously deny it. Crowley's magnificent sets—the glorious Aurora Borealis over the frozen ice, the Rose Window casting colored light on the Gothic columns of Westminster Abbey—the music (by Richard Blackford), the sound design (Gareth Fry), the video design (Jon Driscoll), the costumes (Fotini Dimou), the lighting (Mark Henderson)—all work together as great theater.

And, always, Harrison's way with words ("It's in *verse*") carries the play forward—the wonderfully inventive rhymes, rocking back and forth between parody and poetry, and the recurring images, interconnected like pieces of a puzzle: the laurel wreath, the frozen globe, the mask, the song, the scream.

In Part Two, *The Scream* becomes the central metaphor. Nansen, dogged by Johansen's mocking and cynicism, sinks into despair. He is convinced that the horrors of the modern age have destroyed poetry, and the world will end, all covered in ice:

Listen, listen, all these multiplying shrieks
 which started at the Volga turn into screaming Greeks.
 I thought my spirit, like the *Fram*, could not be sunk
 till it multiplied to millions the *Scream* of Edvard Munch.

He walks offstage, alone, into the endless Arctic night, to the sound of screams alternating with Eva singing Grieg. As Nansen disappears in the ice, Eva's song—sad and scratchy and sublime—turns into an orchestra playing a vast and sonorous symphony. The scream—the play's central symbol of inexpressible horror—and the song—the longing for transcendence and beauty that is also part of being human—come together here, for a beautiful moment, as tragedy.

Then a vision of the National Theatre reflected in the Thames appears—a frozen world, all covered with ice.

Gilbert Murray and Sybil find themselves back in Westminster Abbey, where they hear a terrible hum. "It sounds like the Furies from the *Oresteia*." In Poets' Corner, they see a Kurdish Poet (Aykut Hilmi) who has sewn up his own mouth and eyes in protest against the horrors of *his* world.

Murray has had a moment of recognition:

I'm convinced now that Greek tragedy had screams
 to show the poetry that followed dealt with great extremes

 a scream from the heart that broke the metric flow,
 not to be pathetically translated into English as "Oh woe!"

But now he is finally overcome by his own incomprehension, petty jealousy, and doubt. Furious that a laurel wreath has been placed on the grave of T. S. Eliot, his cruelest critic, Gilbert Murray—classicist, humanitarian—stamps on Eliot's memorial, smashes the tragic mask, screams, and walks out of his own play.

Earlier, Sybil asked Murray who the only woman in the circle of the Rose Window was, and he answered, "You won't believe this, Sybil, it's the Sibyl." But Sybil does believe it. She has never lost her faith in humanity—or in art. And just as she stole the show at the end of Part One, so she

saves it in Part Two, graciously placing the crumpled laurel wreath on the Kurdish Poet's deliberately disfigured head:

Sing the future like the Sibyl. Sing of what's to come.
If it can communicate, your mutilated hum . . .
We, all the Abbey represents. It's had its day.
Wear the laurel wreath. Make poems. Make a play . . .
And if you do, please, write a part for me.
Nothing too big. Anything. I'm always free.

Sybil, like her namesake, can gaze forward at the future, with its even more unimaginable horrors to come, and still imagine poetry—even in languages she cannot understand—even in the hums and buzzes of a damaged world. She believes that art will always go on saying what can't be said and doing what can't be done. As an artist, she is "always free."

The Kurdish Poet hums—ice covers Westminster Abbey—the Rose Window shatters. The theater is covered in darkness and ice. The Arctic wilderness now covers the world; *Fram* is frozen in the ice.

Two African boys (Ronald Chabvuka, Joel Davis, Verelle Roberts, Keanu Taylor) enter, surrounded by millions of buzzing bluebottle flies. They are stowaways who froze to death, enfolded in each other's arms, trying to get to London in the wheelbay of a jumbo jet. Nansen enters.

These boys have been my inspiration, also my despair,
for their doomed expedition to the Arctic of the air.

He gives the boys the flag of the United Nations to plant on the now frozen Earth.

A world past all redemption where no one needs to mark
boundaries round nations all frozen in the dark.

Moved by the story of the frozen wheelbay boys, Nansen and Johansen's ghosts come to a kind of reconciliation. They realize that the bearskin rug they reluctantly shared kept them alive on their long-ago journey Farthest North. They

accept each other's "human heat"—the sometimes banal demands of the body and the sometimes sublime ascents of the soul. Back on the *Fram* at the end of the world, they have learned, finally, despite their difference, to embrace or die.

Fram turns and sails away, and London's South Bank, reflected in the frozen Thames, is projected on the stage. As the light fades to blackout, all that remains is the National Theatre, covered in ice.

Fram is full of echoes of the *Oresteia*—Harrison's own translation played at this very theater—especially of Cassandra tearing off the laurel wreath and haunted by the screams of murdered children. There are also echoes of Samuel Beckett (also buried in Westminster Abbey), especially when Nansen and Johansen are alone again on the *Fram*. At the end of this play, when so much is about the unspeakable, they seem to be anticipating the last lines of *The Unnamable*:

. . . you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.

Fram does rise up from the frozen world, uncrushed. The ship, the play, the "craft," which is both the ship and poetry, go on, forward, into the sacred space, where inspiration and despair—the song and the scream—can come together, and embrace.