



Seana's View: Backstage at Stratford

be a week before you get back to a play, and your lines may indeed seem spontaneous and "new-minted," even improvised, if you haven't brushed up on them. But the time away may also let you hear things anew and respond accordingly. Something in one play may spark a new idea or impulse in the other.

This Season

This season, I play Andromache in *The Trojan Women* and Queen Isabella in *Fuente Ovejuna*, for a total of about 40 minutes stage time. What do I do the rest of the time?

I am not on for the first half hour of *The Trojan Women*, so I don't have to leave my dressing room when they call "Places!" While the play starts, I am still preparing, listening to the show on the tannoid, or backstage speaker, finishing my makeup, putting on my wig, changing into my costume. The Greek plays are a bit of an Olympian event, a lengthy, focussed preparation, a short and often agonizingly intense performance, and then, tremendous relief.

About 15 minutes before my entrance, I go backstage, stand on my cart and listen. To the play. In the dark. Then the actors playing Greek soldiers come and stand by the cart, ready to pull it onstage. Then the little six year old playing my son that day, and there are two who take turns, will be led to me. I open my arms and he steps up on

the cart to join me. Then we are pulled onstage. After 15 minutes of acting and weeping and having "my son" taken from me, I am carted off.

Then, purged of all that adrenalin and emotion, and feeling fine, I sit in the Greenroom, our common room, to chat, catch up on email, snack on goodies, touch up my tear-stained face, only slightly, for the curtain call, and then take my bow with the rest of the cast.

In *Fuente Ovejuna*, when I am not onstage, I can be seen outside the Patterson Theatre in dressing robe and crown, chatting with King Ferdinand. Actors sitting outside the Patterson stage door at intermission are as common a sight as the swans.

When playing two such varied roles, in plays written centuries apart, there is little chance of mixing up the lines. This season I have, however, found myself staring at the mirror halfway through my makeup application only to realize I have put Andromache's eyebrows on Queen Isabella. Especially if I have been doing more *Trojan Women* than *Fuente Ovejuna*.

nas. Some actions are automatic, especially if you are in the same dressing room, in the same dressing gown, looking at the same face, with no costume on to remind you. Nothing that a quick swipe of a tissue can't fix.

Yet I have heard of an actor who showed up for the wrong show, fully dressed in the wrong costume. The one great terror of not doing the same show every day at the same time, is that you misread the schedule and are on a beach or in a "rival" theatre when you should actually be onstage acting. A flash of panic, a quick grab for the ever-present schedule, and you hope, a sigh of relief...or a flurry of apologetic phone calls. And perhaps, the beginning of a beautiful career...for your understudy.

Award-winning Seana McKenna performs in The Trojan Women and Fuente Ovejuna at Stratford Shakespeare Festival this season.

In a repertory company like the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, which presents several plays at the same time over a period of weeks or months, actors can be rehearsing more than one play at the same time, or performing plays and rehearsing another at the same time.

If you are in a "late opener" at Stratford, you may spend every Sunday night in the rehearsal hall until you open, because that is one time most actors are not performing in other shows. You have to share rehearsal time with other shows.

In rep, you don't rehearse the same show every day, and it is sometimes weeks before you get back to a scene, so you have to prepare for the immediate task ahead and review the work you did before.

The great thing about a rep company is variety. To play a comedy in the afternoon and a tragedy in the evening. To play a saucy maid in Moliere and a murderous mother in Euripedes in one day. The audience watches actors, directors and designers face different challenges with different plays. "Was that the same actor we saw this afternoon? I loved him in this, but not in that. Why?"

The old adage "a change is as good as a rest" is true in the rep system. Doing two or three different roles in a week keeps things fresh, sometimes too fresh. It may

Seana McKenna as Andromache and Gregor Reynolds as her son in *The Trojan Women*, 2008 at Stratford Shakespeare Festival.

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