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CULTURE

The many faces of Cate Blanchett – Electra/Persona is theatre at its most deliciously disturbing

2.00

Caroline Phillips reviews last night's opening (and world premier) of Electra/Persona, a new play by Benedict Andrews at the National Theatre, starring Cate Blanchett and Nina Hoss....

There is something deliciously absurd about tossing a coin to decide which of two Oscar-level actresses you are going to see playing which part. Yet that is precisely how Benedict Andrews' world premiere of *Electra/Persona* begins: Cate Blanchett and Nina Hoss make their entrance with hair scraped into buns tight enough to double as a facelift, both in matching black trousers and shirts, looking for all the world like a very chic funeral committee, and hand a coin and their fate to a stranger in the stalls.



NINA HOSS (CLYTEMNESTRA) AND CATE BLANCHETT (ELECTRA) IN
ELECTRA/PERSONA AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE © MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

It is an appropriately glamorous entrance for what may be the National Theatre's most Hollywood
musings in some time. Blanchett, two-time Oscar winner and star of *Black Swan*, *Blue Jasmine* and *The*

evening in some time. Blanchett, two-time Oscar winner and star of *Elizabeth*, *Blue Jasmine* and *Tar*, is reunited with her *Tar* co-star Hoss; if there is something faintly ridiculous about bringing this amount of screen glamour to a Greek tragedy, Andrews knows it and plays with it. The coin toss is not merely a gimmick: the actresses' identities are deliberately made unstable before the first word is spoken. On my night, Blanchett became Clytemnestra and Alma, Hoss Electra and Elisabeth; on another night, the arrangement will be reversed. The programme rather beautifully describes the theme as the fragile line between who we are and who we play.



NINA HOSS (ALMA) AND CATE BLANCHETT (ELISABETH) IN
ELECTRA/PERSONA AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE © MONIKA RITTERSHAUS



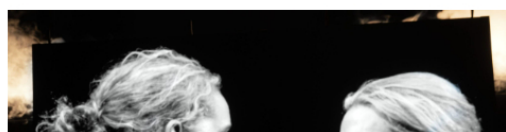
The first half – Sophocles' *Electra* – is terrific. Magda Willi's great flight of steep wooden steps makes a kind of brutal amphitheatre, while Jon Clark's lighting and (Academy Award-winning composer for the film *Joker*) Hildur Guðnadóttir's unsettling sound give the whole thing the quality of some expensive, monochrome arthouse film that has wandered into the theatre. Hoss's *Electra* is all grief, fury and barely contained hysteria; Blanchett's *Clytemnestra* is imperious, chilly and intermittently terrifying. The two women mirror one another physically, scampering up and down the steps as though trapped in a particularly vicious family aerobics class.



CATE BLANCHETT (ELECTRA) AND NINA HOSS (CLYTEMNESTRA) IN
ELECTRA/PERSONA AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE © MONIKA RITTERSHAUS



Then comes *Persona* (formerly a psychological drama film written, directed, and produced by Ingmar Bergman). This is where the evening becomes much more interesting visually – and, for me, where its cinematic side works extraordinarily well. A huge screen descends and Blanchett and Hoss become actors, camerawomen and subjects simultaneously. Faces loom in enormous close-up – when did you ever see the pores on Blanchett's nose in such unforgiving proximity? – and images blur and merge; the audience watches one woman watching another woman watching herself. It is a clever theatrical translation of Bergman's obsession with faces, masks, doubles and the porous boundary between performer and person. The live camera could easily have been irritatingly fashionable; instead, at its best, it is hypnotic.





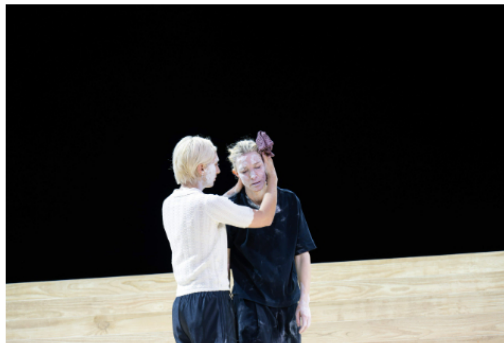
NINA HOSS (ELISABETH) AND CATE BLANCHETT (ALMA) IN
ELECTRA/PERSONA AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE © MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

The National Theatre's programme explains why Andrews has married these two works: in Bergman's film, Elisabeth falls silent while performing Electra. The connection is therefore not entirely arbitrary, and Andrews has clearly relished the opportunity to explore what happens when an actress refuses the very thing on which her profession depends – speech. Bergman himself was fascinated by the collision between cinema and theatre, and the production's design team – including Guðnadóttir and video designer Ash J Woodward – gives the second half an appropriately sensuous, sinister polish.



CATE BLANCHETT (ELECTRA), NINA HOSS (CLYTEMNESTRA) AND ELLA LILY
HYLAND (CHRYSTHEMIS) IN ELECTRA/PERSONA AT THE NATIONAL
THEATRE © MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

But *Electra/Persona* sags in its second hour. The material becomes more diffuse, the psychological games increasingly self-conscious, and the spell that the extraordinary women at its centre have cast begins to loosen. The contrast is striking: *Electra* feels raw, physical and dangerously alive; *Persona* sometimes feels as though it is explaining a film we already know. Several critics found the balance similarly lopsided.



ELLA LILY HYLAND (CHRYSTHEMIS) AND CATE BLANCHETT (ELECTRA) IN
ELECTRA/PERSONA AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE © MONIKA RITTERSHAUS

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Still, there are worse reasons to spend two hours in a theatre than watching Blanchett and Hoss swap identities, faces and emotional ammunition. *Electra/Persona* may not entirely solve the problem of marrying Sophocles to Bergman. But when those two extraordinary 21st century stars are staring into the same camera, and the screen fills with one woman's face dissolving into the other's, it produces something cinema and theatre can both recognise: pure star power, magnified.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

For ticket information, go to www.tickets.nationaltheatre.org.uk.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.



CATE BLANCHETT

ELECTRA/PERSONA

INGMAR BERGMAN

LONDON

NATIONAL THEATRE

NINA HOSS

THEATRE



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POWER 2.14

Jodie Kidd is electrocuted with one million volts in death-defying stunt for Kia



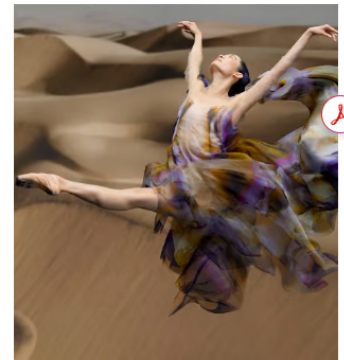
CULTURE 3.00

In conversation with Christy Lee Rogers, one of the most dynamic photographers working today



ESCAPE 5.00

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STYLE ART OF FASHION 4.30

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