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Welcome to Thebes

by
Moira Buffini



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Welcome to Thebes was first performed in the Olivier auditorium of the National Theatre, London, on 15 June 2010.
The cast was as follows:

THEBANS

Megaera **Madeline Appiah**
Sergeant Miletus **Michael WIldman**
Junior Lieutenant Scud **Omar Brown or René Gray**

Eurydice **Nikki Amuka-Bird**

Prince Tydeus **Chuk Iwuji**
Pargeia **Rakie Ayola**

Haemon **Simon Manyonda**
Antigone **Vinette Robinson**
Ismene **Tracy Ifeachor**

Tiresias **Bruce Myers**
Harmonia **Alexia Khadime**
Ploykleitos **Daniel Poyser**

Aglaea **Aicha Kossoko**
Thalia **Joy Richardson**
Euphrosyne **Pamela Nomvete**

Eunomia **Zara Tempest-Walters**
Bia **Karlina Grace**
Helia **Clare Perkins**
Eris **Irma Inniss**
Xenophanes **Cornelius Macarthy**

ATHENIANS

Theseus **David Harewood**
Phaeax **Ferdinand Kingsley**
Talthybia **Jacqueline Defferary**
Enyalius **Victor Power**
Plautus **Daniel Fine**
Ichnaea **Jessie Burton**

Director **Richard Eyre**
Designer **Tim Hatley**
Lighting Designer **Neil Austin**
Music **Stephen Warbeck**
Choreographer **Scarlett Mackmin**
Sound Designer **Rich Walsh**

Author's Note

I've been asked to write an author's note
To explain why I don't put all the full stops in.
The text is not poetry
It is drama
It needs to be useful to actors
And I think this is

Other plays by Moira Buffini published by Samuel French Ltd

Loveplay
A Vampire Story

Moira Buffini's plays include *Blavatsky's Tower* (Machine Room), *Gabriel* (Soho Theatre), *Silence* (Birmingham Rep), *Loveplay* (Royal Shakespeare Company), *Dinner* (National Theatre and West End), *Dying for It*, adapted from *The Suicide* by Nikolai Erdman (Almeida), *A Vampire Story* (NT Connections), *Marianne Dreams* (Almeida), *Welcome to Thebes* (National Theatre), *Handbagged* (Tricycle Theatre) and *wonder.land*, created with Damon Albarn and Rufus Norris (National Theatre).

CHARACTERS

MEGAERA, *a female soldier*
SERGEANT MILETUS
JUNIOR LIEUTENANT SCUD
EURYDICE, *president of Thebes*
HAEMON, *her son*
ANTIGONE, *her niece*
ISMENE, *her niece*

THESEUS, *first citizen of Athens*
PHAEAX, *his aide*
TALTHYBIA, *a diplomat*

TIRESIAS, *a seer*
HARMONIA, *his guide*
POLYKLEITOS, *a mechanic*
PRINCE TYDEUS, *leader of the opposition*
PARGEIA, *a senator*
AGLAEA, *Foreign Secretary*
THALIA, *Minister of Justice*
EUPHROSYNE, *Minister of Finance*

EUNOMIA, *a student of law*
BIA, *Minister of Trade and Industry*
HELIA, *Minister of Agriculture*

ERIS, *Chief of police*
XENOPHANES, *Minister of Education*
ENYALIUS, *head of Athenian security*
PLAUTUS, *Athenian security*
ICHNAEA, *Athenian secret services*

Aides, bodyguards, attendants, citizens.

SETTING

A city named Thebes,
Somewhere in the twenty-first century.

PROLOGUE

Boom

Three Theban soldiers enter: **MEGAERA**, *a woman of twenty,* **MILETUS** *a* **SERGEANT** *of maybe thirty,* **JUNIOR LIEUTENANT SCUD**, *a boy of thirteen. They come through the auditorium.*

MEGAERA OK shut up

MILETUS Anyone still talking now shut up

SCUD SILENCE

MEGAERA Nobody make any sudden moves, nobody get up

MILETUS Stay in your seats

SCUD PHONES

MILETUS Phones – any fucking disco tunes and I will not answer for my men

SCUD You check them NOW

MEGAERA Put the booklets down. Don't read that shit

SCUD All of you make sure those fuckers don't go off

MILETUS Listen to the Junior Lieutenant – he don't like mobile phones

SCUD They have bad energy and they affect your brain. I'm telling you for your own good

MEGAERA Anyone who wants the toilet I don't care. You missed your chance

By now all three are on the stage. It is dawn.

SCUD You've got to look for bomblets

MILETUS I am insulted if the truth be known

SCUD Get looking

MILETUS Our orders are to search for unexploded sub-munitions. No equipment. For our mine detector we have got the Junior Lieutenant here

SCUD They are called bomblets – and they're yellow.

Look like little cans of fizz

And children pull on them because their thirst is bad

BOOM

And you become a rain of meat

And women pulling bits of you from out their hair

And screaming oh disgusting get me some shampoo

MILETUS What are you doing?

MEGAERA I'm sitting down here on my arse

MILETUS Why?

MEGAERA I haven't finished with these people

MILETUS What d'you want with them?

SCUD *jumps on some rubble.*

SCUD BOOM

MEGAERA To welcome them to Thebes

MILETUS Don't tell them all your shit

MEGAERA Why not?

MILETUS They'll leave

MEGAERA Are you the expert?

MILETUS I would leave

MEGAERA I'm going to tell them Theban politics

MILETUS No one understands that

SCUD *jumps on another pile of rubble.*

SCUD BOOM

MILETUS Easy son
Be easy
You stay right by my side

MILETUS *moves away, with* **SCUD**. **MEGAERA** *holds up her gun.*

MEGAERA The only politics in Thebes is this.
This has been the government for years.
I don't know how it started; I don't care
Some brother fighting brother for the power.
My politics began the day the soldiers came.
This is my shit and if you're scared to hear it
Close your eyes.
We heard their guns and ran.
I could feel bullets wooshing past my face.
I saw a man turn round and try to stop one with his hand
Because he thought 'what's this?'
As if the bullet was a fly.
Woosh
They trapped us by the river.
If I could describe you how it felt
The way they held me down and tore
You would be sick I know you would
Or scream and we'd be here all day
While you had counselling and cried.
After five or six I was unconscious I suppose.
The soldiers must have thought that I was dead
Because when I came to, I found myself
In a pile of bodies. My mother
And my sisters seethed with ants.
This is your introduction to our state
'Cause everybody has a tale like this.
I slipped into the river, floated to the fields.

Time was not even. It was odd.
It bends and it's misshapen in my mind.
A day was like a month, a month a year.
I don't think that I spoke one word.
I ate forest nuts and beetles poor old me
My monthly bleeding never came again.

SCUD BOOM

MEGAERA And then Miletus found me
He's the sergeant there, my brother now.
He put this gun into my hand and
Made me human once again.
When we fall upon our enemies
– Always the men who did that to me –
Feelings come on me like I don't know
I am not scared of anything
No pain about my family
No cares
I am all powerful, all fire
I am revenge, Megaera; I am fury
Woosh.
The furies have no laws other than their own
Which even Zeus himself has to obey.
These are my laws now
And this, my life of politics.
Peace?
Never, not for me

MILETUS Megaera

SCUD Dead bloke

MILETUS *and* **SCUD** *have discovered a corpse.* **MEGAERA** *approaches.*

MILETUS Look at that uniform
New boots, the golden braid

SCUD *spins, startled. He raises his rifle.*

SCUD Felt fingers down my back

MEGAERA Well they ain't his
He's maggot food

MILETUS This is Polynices

MEGAERA How do you know?

MILETUS His necklace

MEGAERA Fuck

MILETUS General Polynices

SCUD Did we fight for him?

MEGAERA *spits.*

MILETUS No. He's the one who pulled you out of school; his men

SCUD *reacts to this, the memory like a cuff.*

When I picked you up I was with Creon's men, remember? We fought for him til the stupid fucker got dismembered. Then for Adrastus till he set himself on fire. Then we were in the forest fighting everyone. Last we joined Eteocles. He's the one who still had food

SCUD Who do we fight for now?

MEGAERA That is the question, Scud

SCUD I fought for you

MILETUS I know

SCUD The ghosts are grey

MILETUS Come on

MILETUS *leaves with* **SCUD**.

MEGAERA Welcome
Welcome to Thebes

ACT ONE

Scene One
Arriving

Enter **TIRESIAS** *led by a* **HARMONIA**, *a girl.*

Enter **POLYKLEITOS**, *a mechanic. He sits amid a pile of rifle parts, dismantling weapons.*

Enter **ANTIGONE**, *barefoot, objectless, alone.*

The sound of a helicopter approaching from afar.

Enter Thebans and Athenians, preparing for a state event.

ANTIGONE *watches them as if their actions make no sense.*

TALTHYBIA *runs on; an Athenian aide. Bottled water, paperwork, bad choice of footwear.*

HARMONIA *is begging.* **TALTHYBIA** *declines to give her a coin and exits hurriedly.*

HARMONIA *approaches* **ANTIGONE**.

ANTIGONE I have nothing
Nothing no

TIRESIAS You have not survived this war, Antigone
You're breathing but you're not alive.

ANTIGONE *begins to walk away. His voice arrests her.*

The dead see everything you do
In darkness they have eyes that never close

Up here, everyone is blind

Think hard where you belong

ANTIGONE Don't talk to me, Tiresias

TIRESIAS You and your sister

Last remnants of a cursed house

Follow your destiny, Antigone

The helicopter, louder. **ANTIGONE** *exits.*

TALTHYBIA *enters. A makeshift Theban choir begin to sing a national anthem.*

Other Athenian men and women enter in silk and linen suits; Theban officials in cheaper suits or trying to hold together their national dress in the face of the helicopter's gale.

The helicopter becomes deafening. One of the choir runs. **HARMONIA** *seeks cover.*

TIRESIAS *remains, the only still point in the scene.*

Helicopters are obviously beasts of terror in Thebes, for the makeshift choir has fled.

TALTHYBIA *loses her hairdo. Everyone crouches in the blast.*

The blast dies down. **TALTHYBIA** *rushes off, followed by soldiers and aides.*

Bodyguards and aides cross with all the luggage and paraphernalia of a diplomatic stay. **HARMONIA** *stands up, trying to see.*

THESEUS *enters, a confident man in his prime.* **TALTHYBIA** *is at his side.*

TALTHYBIA Theseus, I am Talthybia

It's such a / pleasure

THESEUS Thebes

TALTHYBIA We have our people working on a new hotel and embassy but at the moment there's two options, sir; the

compound where our military are or there's an invitation from the president elect, Eurydice, to stay here at the presidential palace. We've checked it over; basic but OK. A lot of art and artefacts; no electricity. There is no national grid right now

THESEUS I'm staying here?

TALTHYBIA It's a building of historic interest and much cooler than the compound. It also gets the breeze; built by Cadmus and Harmonia who founded Thebes

THESEUS Do they have internet?

TALTHYBIA At the compound we have internet

THESEUS They got a phone?

TALTHYBIA Mobiles, yes amazingly. They seem to go on working even when the power is down

THESEUS I want to call my wife

TALTHYBIA I'm sure they're setting up a private line

THESEUS Right now

I feel like telling her I'm here

TALTHYBIA Please borrow mine sir. It would be such a privilege –

THESEUS Sure

TALTHYBIA To know that I've assisted with your personal communication

PHAEAX *joins them.* **THESEUS** *dials.*

Everyone has mobiles; it's astonishing. You go out to the villages and even in these little one-goat towns without a single flushing loo, everyone is talking on a mobile phone

PHAEAX *(to* **TALTHYBIA***)* Excuse me where's the band?

TALTHYBIA Yes actually, there is no band

THESEUS Hey Phaedra – guess where I am

Oh – could you get her?

PHAEAX Theseus was told there'd be a band. He is expecting one

TALTHYBIA Well very / sorry but

PHAEAX If there wasn't one I should have been informed

TALTHYBIA I did my best to get a band. The Thebans / told me this

PHAEAX He likes the music here

TALTHYBIA The band are dead except the bass guitar

He's alive but only one hand left

THESEUS / She what?

TALTHYBIA So then I tried to organise a choral group;

Authentic local sound

THESEUS / OK

TALTHYBIA But people don't like helicopters here. They've gone

PHAEAX Would you explain that to him please?

Because this is insulting

I can't even see a fucking flag

PHAEAX *exits.*

THESEUS Get her to call me on this number; thanks

TALTHYBIA The city's still unstable, sir

We didn't think it wise to make a lot of fuss

THESEUS Quite so. I'd better keep this phone; she's going to call me back

TALTHYBIA That's absolutely

What an honour

Sir, I did intend for there to be some music as a welcome but –

THESEUS No commotion. Good

TALTHYBIA I'm glad you think so

THESEUS Yes. I've come here in humility

I want to see first-hand what we Athenians have done

We've given common people here control of their own fate

The gift of democratic government

TALTHYBIA The voting; frankly it was moving –

THESEUS They need to see what democratic leadership can be

PHAEAX *re-enters.*

PHAEAX Sir, they have some rooms prepared. Perhaps you'd like to freshen up? Before you meet the president elect

THESEUS Just look at this old palace

TALTHYBIA Soon to be renamed the congress

THESEUS Dionysus; he was born here

The great god Frenzy

PHAEAX Yes sir

THESEUS Bacchus

Pulled from the thigh of Zeus

Maybe right where we stand

PHAEAX Forgive me sir that's not correct

He wasn't pulled from the thigh here

He was sewn into it.

/ Zeus gestated the foetal god –

THESEUS Dionysus comes from Thebes

That's what I'm saying

PHAEAX Yes sir

THESEUS Have they got plumbing here?

TALTHYBIA We've been installing it. No hot water but

THESEUS I like my water cold.

So this is Thebes

You can almost smell the history

EURYDICE *is dressing.* **ISMENE** *attends her.*

Scene Two
Dressing

EURYDICE First, I will express my disbelief

ISMENE In what?

EURYDICE Disbelief they voted for us

I can't believe it

ISMENE Well they did

EURYDICE I only fought because there had to be an opposition

We could not let the violence go on

Could not have another Polynices

So I found myself –

It's literally like that

Found myself with others

Acting to oppose

Speaking

Words issuing from out my mouth

In torrents

A solace from the pain

I never dreamt that politics would be my path

I've always hated them

Hated standing there at Creon's side

Watching the ebb and flow of power from man to man

The little games of consequence

Experiments with human lives.

Politics is what I've always fought against.

But now I've won

I'm feeling sick

I've promised them pipe dreams, Ismene

ISMENE You've promised peace

EURYDICE I'm feeling I might actually throw up

ISMENE Well if you do, please miss the outfit

EURYDICE Creon had principles until he was in power.
I saw what power did to him.
I watched the man diminish as it took its hold.
I watched his hopes and values all corrode

ISMENE The people know you're different

EURYDICE Am I, though?
Am I?
What will it do to me?
Ismene

ISMENE Yes

EURYDICE I'm meeting Theseus

ISMENE I know; it's so exciting

EURYDICE I look awful in this dress

ISMENE I haven't finished yet
You need accessories
A scarf, you see?
Connotations of humility
But powerful mystique.
It softens all your lines
And then the architecture works

EURYDICE Oh yes

ISMENE You need an elegant but manly watch
To show that Time is your new god

EURYDICE I love you

ISMENE What about a bag?

EURYDICE No bag

ISMENE Athenians all have them
This one is designer

EURYDICE I'm walking out into a world of men
Unadorned and empty-handed

ISMENE *holds her.*

ISMENE Bring us justice

AGLAEA *enters.*

AGLAEA He is here

EURYDICE I'm ready

AGLAEA You have made a terrible mistake

EURYDICE Don't you like it?

AGLAEA You have not invited Sparta

EURYDICE Oh

AGLAEA I assumed you'd have the sense to see they must be here

EURYDICE If I invite the Spartans, Theseus might leave. I'll not antagonise him

AGLAEA We need Sparta or he'll walk all over you. We need a bidding war with Thebes as the prize –

EURYDICE Athens stands for everything we've fought for; freedom and democracy –

AGLAEA For their own citizens

EURYDICE Sparta is secretive, oppressive and aggressive
They want an empire here by stealth –

AGLAEA So does Theseus
We are staring at the Titans
Monsters both –
Both poised to scavenge us
Be practical
We have to play them
One against the other

EURYDICE That's a dangerous game for novices

AGLAEA It's the only way we stand to win
We need money, not ideals
Stability will only come with economic growth

EURYDICE I will not get into bed with a regime
That uses fear and violence to control.
In Athens human rights are shrined in law

AGLAEA They are a luxury
When we have food enough / and sanitation

EURYDICE Our principles won us this election
And in the ruins of this shattered state
They are the only shreds of dignity we have.
I put my trust in Theseus – on principle

AGLAEA Then go and kiss his hairy hand

EURYDICE I'm sorry that we disagree

AGLAEA Nice dress

She starts to go.

Be careful please
I know he wears a splendid suit
Sewn with a democratic thread;
He's still a warlord with a warlord's heart

EURYDICE All men are not so

AGLAEA He fights his wars behind a desk
But don't imagine that the beast is tame

EUPHROSYNE Eurydice, they've found a body by the walls. It is the corpse of Polynices

EURYDICE *and* **ISMENE** *are profoundly affected.*

EURYDICE How do you know?

EUPHROSYNE His necklace

EURYDICE I must see him

EUPHROSYNE Come child

AGLAEA Don't keep Theseus waiting

EURYDICE *(going)* Nothing takes precedence

EURYDICE *and* **EUPHROSYNE** *exit.*

AGLAEA Is this the way it goes?

Already she has put her own needs first

ISMENE Polynices killed her son

AGLAEA I know

ISMENE My cousin Menoceus. He was only just thirteen

AGLAEA I know

ISMENE Polynices pulled the brains from out his skull while still he lived –

AGLAEA Yes Ismene, yes

But it is past.

Her job is to secure our future

ISMENE Why don't you go and meet him?

AGLAEA Because I am incapable of hiding what I think

And I think Theseus a bag of wind

THESEUS *with* **TALTHYBIA** *and* **PHAEAX**.

Scene Three
Predicting

THESEUS So on a scale of one to ten, exactly how fucked is this place?

TALTHYBIA I'd say it's been up to eleven.

Thebes is conflict-devastated

THESEUS Currently around?

TALTHYBIA Eight or nine

Still very volatile

THESEUS OK

TALTHYBIA The election has improved things but there is no infrastructure whatsoever; thousands of displaced, traumatised people, destruction of homes, agriculture, industry. The violence was bestial. There were seven different armed militias all advancing on the city

THESEUS I heard they ate each other

TALTHYBIA Yes, combatants used to eat the brains of those they killed in order to inherit strength and skill. Apparently a custom from pre-Cadmus times. There has been indescribable brutality. I put accounts into my briefing

THESEUS You wrote that briefing?

TALTHYBIA Yes sir

THESEUS What's your name again?

TALTHYBIA Talthybia

THESEUS That's right. Nice piece of work, Talthybia

TALTHYBIA Thank you

THESEUS It almost put me off my in-flight meal

TALTHYBIA May I say on behalf of everybody working on the ground, how very glad we are to see you. Your visit's a terrific boost to our morale

THESEUS They have democracy and now they can rise out of this disgusting quagmire

TALTHYBIA That is our hope

THESEUS So – we have a conference tomorrow

TALTHYBIA Yes indeed

THESEUS And when do we begin to pull our peacekeepers out?

PHAEAX In ten days time

TALTHYBIA But sir –

PHAEAX Where is the president elect? She should be here by now

ELSEWHERE: **EURYDICE** *is staring at Polynices's corpse.* **EUPHROSYNE** *and the soldiers accompany. She cannot tear her eyes away.*

TALTHYBIA It's probably some urgent matter

PHAEAX She can have no conception of your status, sir

EUPHROSYNE What shall we do with him?

TALTHYBIA It's my belief that Thebes will need our presence here long-term. There's a tremendous will for change but it won't happen overnight. In Eurydice, the people have chosen a leader / who –

THESEUS Who is not here

EURYDICE Do nothing

Let me think

PHAEAX This is clearly someone sir, with no experience

TALTHYBIA She has experienced a decade of extreme and bloody war. When Creon died, the generals put her under house arrest. And even from her prison here she fought. She gave her strength to this amazing movement of women all risking their lives for peace

THESEUS The women, right

TALTHYBIA They would congregate in numbers and place themselves in the line of fire. During the peace talks they barricaded all the men inside the building, shamed them into peace. I find it deeply moving, inspirational

THESEUS Yes / quite so

TALTHYBIA She's given people hope

EURYDICE Polynices

TALTHYBIA The leaders of this grass-roots movement; they are now the government

ELSEWHERE: **EURYDICE** *and* **EUPHROSYNE** *exit.*

PHAEAX The minister of finance was a teacher in a rural school

TALTHYBIA Yes; she's incorruptible

She's sweeping out the toads, the ghosts, the layabouts

She'll spend our money on the people not on palaces and cars

THESEUS There's no such thing as incorruptible

TALTHYBIA Eurydice has said that everything must change.

The men have shown what they can do for Thebes

And now the women will

PHAEAX Woah

THESEUS But what do we think; do we trust her?

TALTHYBIA Yes I think / she's –

THESEUS Do we like her?

TALTHYBIA – very good news

THESEUS Because she isn't here. Why is that?

TIRESIAS Welcome blind traveller

THESEUS I'm sorry?

TIRESIAS *is with* **HARMONIA**. *She holds out a hand for money.*

PHAEAX What's this person doing here?

TIRESIAS Welcome to the country of the blind

PHAEAX I thought we had secured this area

TALTHYBIA He's a beggar. That's his place. We've checked him and he's not a threat. Don't look so scared; you don't have to give him anything

THESEUS I don't have any Theban currency

TALTHYBIA The begging's kind of overwhelming. It simply isn't possible to carry that much change – so I've developed strategies. I only give to grandmothers; they're the poorest and most selfless. Sometimes I give to exceptionally hideous amputees but

THESEUS That is a grandmother

TALTHYBIA No sir, excuse me; that's a man

THESEUS It's a woman

TIRESIAS Give me your hand King Theseus

THESEUS Actually my title is First Citizen. We don't have kings in Athens; we're a democratic state

TIRESIAS The future holds my clear unblinking gaze

It's only in the present that I'm blind.

Why don't you let me tell you what I see?

THESEUS Female, unquestionably

TALTHYBIA Male

TIRESIAS I'm both.

I saw two serpents mating on a path

TALTHYBIA We have no interest, sorry

TIRESIAS *(taking* **THESEUS***' hand)* Intertwined

Encoiled, jaws wrapped round each other

Poison dripping in mistrust even as

They slithered propagation

THESEUS Oh OK

TIRESIAS The sight disgusted me. It seemed too human.

I tore the slippery beasts apart

And crushed one with my heel. It was the she.

As punishment the snakes made me a woman

THESEUS The snakes changed you into a woman?

TIRESIAS No punishment, say I, to be a female.

Lying back, my legs spread wide, I know

Ten times the bliss I suffered as a man.

We suffer pleasure as we suffer pain

You know this to be true. So does your wife

THESEUS My wife?

TIRESIAS She's young; you married her last year

THESEUS Good guess

TIRESIAS She harbours love for someone else.

She doesn't want to but it's there, a love.

It grows in her like cancer day by day.

It will consume her

THESEUS *pulls back his hand, deeply affected.*

THESEUS What the fuck

TALTHYBIA He's just a bullshit beggar, sir

HARMONIA *holds out her hand for money.*

Move along now please. You get him out of here

EURYDICE *enters with* **EUPHROSYNE**.

THESEUS I want internet, hot water. I don't care if you drag the generator up the hill yourself. I want a private line, Phaedra on the end of it. And where's the fucking president elect? I've flown all the way from Athens to witness her inauguration and she doesn't have the decency to meet me

EURYDICE Theseus

Hello

EURYDICE *takes his hand.*

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