

The Fires of Troy

Patrick Craddock

based on Greek legends

March 2017

*A stage play written as a one-woman performance to be performed in two acts. The solo actor, Hecuba, is an old woman.

Act One takes place before the battle for Troy.

Act Two takes place after Troy is destroyed by the Greeks.

Notes for Play Director:

Hecuba talks to people who visit her onstage. She is not mad.

These are genuine conversations.

A stage. Hecuba enters, as Queen of Troy, an elegantly dressed old woman. She looks at the audience.

HECUBA

Look at me. Especially you ladies. I am not bad looking for my age, am I? Some people think I am beautiful. Correction. Was beautiful. Many years ago. I am married to Priam, King of Troy. We live in this exquisite city. It has six strong gates, huge walls. Troy is impregnable. Unless we let you enter, you cannot.

I gave my husband, Priam, many children. How old was I at my first birth, fourteen. Perhaps fifteen years certainly no older. My body was like a cherry, young, sweet. But now after so many children I have slack breasts, a distorted belly and my lines of age are everywhere. Ah, ladies. Smile. Your lovely first baby is also the first sign of old age. I had nineteen children. *(laughs)* How many of you have given birth to so many? None, I suspect. I see some young women among you who have never given birth. There is an innocence in your faces. I sense the sweetness of spring flowers. Others women I know have had several children.

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

Are you like me with a child you love the most, one you misunderstand, one you dislike but you will not admit it to even in your dark thoughts when you lie awake in bed. Was there one child you feared for as he become an adult. Perhaps you prayed to the Gods to help you understand that child. Let me tell you about some of my children. Hector. My first born. A wise son. He will be King one day, a ruler of Troy, this great city. Then, there is Troilus. My youngest. Still in his teens. Not so bright as Hector, and so hot headed. Cassandra. A beautiful looking daughter. She is, alas... perhaps crazy as she talks about imaginary events inside her head. She guesses the future. We all try that to do that sometime, don't we? Crazy Cassandra. My pregnancies have been painful, but some were pleasurable too. My girls existed in my womb for nine months like flowers waiting to bloom. Birds sang when they were born. Hector's birth was good. But, there was that one birth, Paris, a son linked with my dream and a dark prophecy. I recall talking with my husband about it.

HECUBA turns and looks sideways. She sees her husband.

HECUBA

Priam, Oh ,Oh. My dream last night. So awful. The baby turning inside me. He was trying to escape as if he was being chased. I gave birth to a torch and not a child. A flaming torch. Burning wood. Smoke hurt my eyes and throat. I ran through the streets of Troy with fires all around me.

HECUBA stops talking with Priam and speaks with the audience.

HECUBA

In my pregnancies, like you mothers out there, I wanted good children.

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

Strong sons who would throw
javelins and shoot arrows
straight. I saw my boys in my
mind's eye, also aiming arrows
of love at young women. Perhaps,
too, I thought, I will have a son
who is a circus star to jump
over the backs of bulls and
horses.

But, the prophet told me a
different story that day. I
recall his deep voice. "Beware,
beware, Hecuba. This birth will
be a boy who will destroy you,
destroy your husband, your
children and Troy." How could
that happen, I thought, how can a
baby destroy us? Priam gave the
old man a gift of gold and he
left.

Soon I gave birth. A beautiful
boy. His eyes, jewels. A face
framed like gold in a wedding
ring. I cried. He had long
fingers. He would play music. As
he sucked me I sang a song. His
gurgles were a magic
accompaniment to my small melody.
But there was that prophecy.
Priam entered with the prophet by
his side. I listened as I fed my
new son from my warm breasts.

HECUBA is now talking with the Prophet and Priam.

HECUBA

Oh, Prophet. Why do you bring bad
news? My newborn is to cause the
death of us all. How can that be,
how will that ever happen? But,
but, I know. The Gods rule our
life. We must not offend Zeus.
Yes, yes. Zeus on Mount Olympus
sees all. We obey or face a
curse. That old law. You must take
my beautiful baby to die on the
cold mountain. How can Zeus be so
cruel? Look at him. He makes
Phoebus, the bright sun look
dull.

Let me keep him for tonight,
Priam? I will feed him for the
last time from my aching breasts.
When he is asleep with my milk,
take him.

HECUBA talks with the audience.

HECUBA

And so I lost my golden baby. He was taken to the slopes of Mount Olympus to die during the cold night. The official story for the public was that he was stillborn. My baby died alone and in the cold. I cried for weeks and would not eat or sleep. I never wanted another child. But no matter how much a wife feels, there are duties. We alone continue the human race. It is our special gift from Zeus. So many times I wished I had defied the prophecy, defied the Gods. Each year I had a chance to remember my baby at our funeral games. Each year, I saw him in my mind growing up. It would have been his eighteenth birthday. The funeral games started. My other sons were there, competing. Hector was ahead of everyone as usual, but then a peasant boy began to win tournaments. He took on my sons, one after the other and showed his skill at wrestling and running and throwing the javelin. Cassandra looked at him and called out ... come here. He talked with her. I watched the two of them. Cassandra, a pious young girl lived in the temple of Apollo. She wanted to be there forever. Apollo, the God, fell madly in love with Cassandra. He gave her the gift of prophecy. Imagine, a young virgin who can see the future. It was a gift never ever given to a human by a God. But, in exchange Apollo wanted her body. Foolish male God. Cassandra would not sacrifice her virginity. She told Apollo, "You gave me a gift, I did not promise you my body. Leave me alone." Apollo, the sweet God frowned. His face turned black. In a fit of rage he spat into her mouth. Apollo cursed her. Cassandra fainted. From that day on Cassandra would still see the future, but no-one would ever believe her prophecies.

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

They would see a mad woman.
 But back to my story of the
 peasant young man and Cassandra.
 She looked in his eyes, at his
 high cheekbones, his golden hair.
 She touched him softly with her
 hands. Then her fingers
 trembled. Her face turned pale.
 She screamed, "Go, Go, Go" as if
 she wanted to get rid of him. It
 was confusing. He stood there,
 tired, sweating...with his hair
 in his eyes. What do you mean, he
 murmured? I stared at the peasant
 boy. The face, the hair and music
 in his voice. It was familiar.
 But he was a stranger. Where are
 you from, I asked? He said he was
 a farm boy from the hills who
 looked after animals. I looked
 at him. My mind was spinning.
 Before I could speak again, an
 old servant man pushed through
 the crowd and threw himself on
 the ground. "I could not kill
 the baby" he sobbed. "Do with me,
 as you will. I could not kill
 him. He was a baby."
 I knew then that this was my son
 standing before me. "What is
 your name?" I asked. The young man
 spoke. "I am called Paris." "You
 are my son," I murmured. "Prince
 Paris of the royal family of
 Troy." He stood there
 bewildered, but Hector realised
 immediately. He smiled, grasped
 Paris by the waist lifting him
 high and shouting, "Brother,
 Brother." One by one, the family
 embraced Paris, all except
 Cassandra. She stood alone,
 shaking her head and crying. I
 tried to talk with her. Her
 language was incomprehensible. I
 gathered odd words ...fire...
 rape...a horse... just
 meaningless words from my crazy
 daughter. The games were soon
 over. Paris was decorated with a
 wreath of olives and carried head
 high through the great gates of
 Troy to the palace. Feasting
 began. It was Cassandra who had
 first recognised Paris. I wanted
 her to share our joy but she had
 gone to the temple.

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

We dressed Paris in royal garments. I loved him. Priam loved him. And of course, with such looks, he was soon admired by many women. Paris married a beautiful woman. But, did he love his wife? I don't really know. Men are so infatuated by the looks of women. Paris fell for beauty. Most Trojan and Greek men are like that. Fools. Take Menelaus. A Greek king. Brother to Agamemnon. Also a king. Both Kings are the inheritors of a curse. But, they ignore it. Menelaus marries Helen of Sparta, the most beautiful woman in our world. A goddess, or half of one. What a story that is. I know the rumour and I believe it is the truth. Leda, a faithful wife, lived in Sparta. Zeus wanted sex with her and changed himself into a swan. He seduced Leda and Helen was the result. The child of a god. No wonder Helen is so beautiful. Helen grows up and is married to Menelaus, one of the two brothers. Then one day, Paris, my stunning looking son is asked by Zeus to judge a contest and give the prize of the golden apple of the sun to the most beautiful woman in the world.

HECUBA stops the story as she sees Paris approaching.

HECUBA

Oh, Paris. I was just talking about you and the golden apple. Remember. Zeus asks you to judge a simple contest with only three competitors. Zeus's wife wanted the prize. She offers you power, wealth and gold to outshine a thousand suns. Paris. You ignore Hera - a beautiful woman and wife to Zeus. Your second choice, the wise and beautiful Goddess Athene. She offers wisdom and peace. If she had won the golden apple, we would not have this damn war with the Greeks still dragging on for ten sad years.
(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

My son. You could have brought peace to your old mother and father. You ignore that offer too. There is one woman left. Aphrodite and her beauty. She cheats. She puts the face of Helen inside your head. You then fall deep down into the shimmer of her sight. Foolish man. But Helen is already married to Menelaus, a King in Greece. Don't look at me as if you didn't know, Paris. You give the golden apple to Aphrodite. She promises warm lips, full breasts, long slim legs, shimmering eyes. Lustful son. So you kidnap Helen from her husband to bring her to Troy without a thought for the future. You now know the body price of Helen is war. Troy versus Greece. So many men have died because that woman knows throws and shows her body. Menelaus and his brother bring black ships with blood thirsty crews to destroy Troy and take Helen back. Their cunning Greek general leader Odysseus, wants to kill us all. Our soldiers throw fire bombs at their ships at night and still the Greek armies wait and wait. This war is wasting so many lives. Oh - don't smile at me Paris. I don't have words for the dangers you force us all to face. You are annoying me, Paris. Beauty is a disease. Go. Go to your stupid Helen and have sex with her. Go. Go.

Hecuba watches Paris depart . She is scowling and turns to address the audience.

HECUBA

Who would have sons seduced by the faces of fair women. Paris is all image. He upset Hera, Athene and Zeus over that dammed apple. I fear the Gods. When we praise them, they take it for granted. When we ignore or slight them, they are upset, angry, vengeful, especially Hera. Like humans. Full of flaws.

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

Hera's is always angry with Zeus and his sordid sexual affairs. Men do not understand the word, fidelity. Zeus likes married women, why? Is it a game? I think so. Did you hear about him and Alcmene? A good wife. Zeus disguises himself as her husband and has sex with her for three days. She becomes pregnant with Hercules. Hera goes berserk and delays the birth. Result. Huge baby. Poor Alcmene. She must have gone through hell with that pregnancy. And Hercules. Crazy man, he turns out to be. Oh. Look. There's Troilus. My teenage son.

She calls out to him

HECUBA

Troilus. Welcome. Your face is glowing. What is it? Oh, No shyness with your mother please!!!! Who is she? Tell me. If you won't, I'll tell you. I had lunch with your Uncle Pandar yesterday. He talked about his niece, Cressida. A smart intelligent young woman. Oh, oh...I see you know her. Lord Pandar said he was trying to get you both together. Spot on, wasn't I, Troilus? Enjoy her company, have fun... and yes, I see you want to leave. Ok. Ok. If you see Hector's wife on your travels say I would like to speak with her.

Troilus leaves and Hecuba talks with the audience.

HECUBA

Troilus is an idealist. He and Cressida get along well together, but one of their hearts or both will be broken. Men have more threads of idealism in their hearts than any woman can hold and secure. I fear for him. Something will break. Then he will speak sadly and badly about all women. It's men who break their promises more than we women have ever made.

She turns and smiles as she sees a woman approaching.

HECUBA

Andromache. Oh, look at you.
 Beautiful in that long green silk
 dress with flowers adorning your
 dark hair. The men of Troy must
 love you ..oh, oh (* laughing*) I
 will be more careful with what I
 say. I know you only love Hector.
 Where is my beautiful little
 grandson? I haven't seen him for
 three days. Bring him to my room.
 I will feed him sweets, figs and
 fresh orange juice. Don't frown,
 Andromache. Oh. Well. I will ...
 perhaps ... give him one sweet
 only and a drink of cool fresh
 water. Be tolerant of a
 grandmother who loves and spoils
 him. He will grow up to become
 like his father. He will be tall.
 I want a scholar, a fighter, a
 musician, a poet, all in one
 grandson. Is that too much? Troy
 will be proud of your little
 Astynax when he grows up.

HECUBA sees HELEN approaching.

HECUBA

Look. Here comes Helen. Don't
 leave. Stay and greet her at
 least. I know. I know.
 Respectable married women. But,
 Helen is a wife to Paris.
 Adultery? You blame her for this
 long war. Paris is to blame too.
 I know the argument, Andromache.
 She could have refused him. But,
 that's in the past. When the two
 of them are together their faces
 dazzle my old eyes and ...your
 husbands's also. Hector is
 strong, loyal but he also has an
 eye for a pretty woman. At least
 don't scowl at Helen. Priam dotes
 on her good looks. Men take
 along time to grow up.

HECUBA greets Helen.

HECUBA

Helen, my child.Come, let me
 embrace you. What news today? You
 frown. Andromache is frowning
 too. What do you wish for, my
 child...a new dress, more
 flowers, more time with Paris.
 Where is he?

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

Polishing his armour to fight the Greeks!!! Some men put on their best clothes when they go to war. Don't worry, he is not so much a warrior as you think. I know my sons. They are all different. Come sit by me. Andromache, we will talk again later. Bring my grandchild.

Andromache leaves. Hecuba talks in a confidential manner with Helen as if they are exchanging secrets.

HECUBA

Yes, yes. Of course, Helen. I've told non-one about our secret meeting with Odysseus. He was lucky we did not kill him. Fancy, the general of the Greek army, dressed as a beggar, sneaking into Troy. My personal guard wanted to ram him with a spear. But, he held back. He was right to suspect that Odysseus was a peace messenger here to talk with you and me. I too noticed how Odysseus kept his eyes low when he talked about his officers being tired, rebellious talk among the soldiers, disease, dysentery, despair. His voice was so bitter and sad as he said they all wanted to go home to wives, mistresses and children. They hate Troy so much. I think he was right to suggest giving a gift to Goddess Athene. I've been watching it grow. A large wooden horse. Huge. And Helen. He was right. Now, it is built and on the beach.

HECUBA is excited

HECUBA

Tonight the Greeks are gone. Tents, huts, guard posts... all demolished, packed. My scouts watched the ships depart. This war is over. Troy survived. Look at the gift the Greeks left for the Gods. I have arranged for the wooden horse to be taken to the town square and placed next to the temple of Athene.

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

Greek thinking is that wooden horse had to be huge to pay for their ten years of stubbornness and stupidity.

Troy is victorious. Not a Greek in sight. A thousand black ships sailed home to Greece. Tonight and tomorrow we feast. The siege of Troy is over. The names of Priam, Hecuba, Hector, Paris and Helen will be forever linked to the story of Troy. Farewell, Odysseus. Enjoy your voyage home.

INTERVAL INTERVAL INTERVAL INTERVAL

HECUBA is dressed in dirty burnt clothing. She has a smoke stained face, her hair is dishevelled. She is distraught

HECUBA

Oh, my city. Troy. Destroyed. On fire. We are both dying. Husband. Dead. Hector. Dead. Paris. Dead. Troilus. Dead. My daughter Polyxena. Dead. Lying forever on the tomb of Achilles. Cassandra, seized from the temple. Captive. Andromache. Captive. Wait for me in Hades, my children. Wait for me. I am coming.

HECUBA sees a shadow moving near her.

HECUBA

Who's there? Show yourselves. Come you Greek soldiers. I face you to die. Hecuba. Queen of Troy. Show your dirty bloodstained faces to the Trojan Queen.

HECUBA realises that there are no soldiers. It is Helen.

HECUBA

Helen. You are here. Safe, my child. Look at the flames licking our towers of Ilium. We are doomed. Troy is burning to sacred ash. We die in the womb of time. Priam, husband, dead. Hector dead. Troilus dead. Cassandra. Your prophecy was true. Oh, Helen. You have tears in your eyes. Where is Paris?

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

Women cry for their men. I am now an old woman with eyes that are turning blind with shame and horror. Death will soon ease my pain and age. You are still beautiful Helen. What is that you are whispering? Yes, Yes. Paris had a wife before you. He said he loved her. I doubted it, even at the wedding feast. She gave him a son. What is he like? I don't know. I never saw the son. Paris never saw him either after you arrived. The boy grew up with his mother. Ah...of course. His son would have those Paris good looks. But, what.... what? You say his son arrived in your room with a message from his mother.

Hecuba listens intently to what Helen is saying.

HECUBA

Her message said? Oh, Oh. Then Paris burst into your room. Threw him to the floor, drew his sword, called you a whore and cut the boy's throat. Oh, Paris. Paris. Rash foolish son. Even the prophecy did not say you would kill your son. Our men both love and destroy us, Helen. Sit here my child. Let me console you. Helen. See the flames are now burning the temple of Athene. When revenge will she take for sacrilege? Our Gods are like humans. They want homage, love. Helen. Talk with me. We are women in peril to be raped, killed. No one will rape me. I am old, ugly. Once I was a young Queen, with royal robes, scented with flowers. Helen. Let me see your face. What is happening? Your face. It is changing ? Come closer. Your eyes. They are darker, The blue is becoming jet black. Look at me. Do not turn away. Helen. Helen. Your eyes. Like the eyes of swans. Swans. The white swan. Ah. You are not Helen. It is you, Zeus. Your tricks again. Why choose to become a swan again, Zeus?

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

I am not Leda, a woman to be
seduced. Look at me. Zeus!!!!

HECUBA knows she is in the presence of the God Zeus. Her voice changes, her gestures change as she talks with the God.

Note to Play Director: Hecuba listens to Zeus speaking and repeats some of his words as if she needs to say them to herself to understand what is happening. +The Play Director of this drama may want to consider using stage lighting or audio sounds to emphasise this scene with Zeus.____++

HECUBA

Aieee. Aieeee..... Those black
swan eyes.. It is you. Zeus.
Oh, great Zeus. Why do you even
bother with Troy? Your curses
have worked. All our men are
dead, teenage boys with their
throats cut, smaller boys, even
my grandson, thrown over the city
walls.

HECUBA

What are you saying, Zeus? Helen
is not in Troy. That cannot be.
She is here. I was talking with
her. She is the wife of Paris.
Helen is in Troy, Zeus. I was
talking with her, right here. Of
course, I know Helen is your
child. You turned yourself into a
swan and seized her mother, Leda.
A good wife. Seduced. Loved. You
say. No, I would call it
rape, Zeus. You raped Helen's
mother.
You say Helen is not in Troy.
What are you talking about? Yes.
She is your daughter and must be
respected. All women should be
respected, but how many men know
that? What? Helen is now living
on a sacred island and Paris
never met her. How can that be?
She is here and caused a war.
Paris stole her from her
husband. He was wrong to do that.
I told him. Many times. He
married her. Ten years ago. Now,
you say the real Helen was never
here, never in Troy. Paris was
deceived, The Greeks were
deceived. Aaah. Zeus!!!!

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

To stop your daughter being raped, disgraced, you turn her into an apparition. A human portrait created by you. You hide the real Helen. Near the cave of the Minotaur. Protecting her from the hands of men until the time when she will be returned to her husband. Curse all Gods. You deceive us forever. Zeus. I curse you. You laugh at me.!!!! A human cannot curse the Gods. I can and will and do. I curse you. Do your worst? What can I lose more? Turn me into a dog if you wish. I care not. A dog of war. Zeus. Stay. Stay. Talk with me. Listen to Mad Hecuba. I curse you, Zeus. I curse you.

HECUBA suddenly realises Zeus has gone

HECUBA

Aiiiii - Zeus. Vanish back to your home on Mount Olympus. You tricked me, you tricked Troy. But, why? Aiiii. Men learn their behaviour from the Gods. You Zeus, just lust for what takes your fancy. My Hector for family loyalty. Paris for beauty. Odysseus for power. Which of you Gods supported the Greeks? Where are you, Odysseus? Show yourself. Tell me which Goddess was charmed with your cunning?

HECUBA sees Odysseus

HECUBA

Odysseus. Clever, cunning, cruel Odysseus. You burn my city, kill all my sons and are taking Cassandra to Greece. Poor child. You say she will be a gift to a king. An honour for a temple virgin to be married to an old man? Honourable you say, huh, what is honour to a defiled woman? You threw Andromache's baby son to death over the walls of Troy. Proof of your sadistic mind that no Trojan male will live to avenge Troy. But, the tale of Troy will live forever while your bones rot amid the shit of cockroaches.

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

Even in Hades you will be hated.
 Yes, yes. The Greeks have won.
 Helen is yours again, for what it
 is worth. Do you know Helen is
 not real? Zeus said....oh, never
 mind. You will not understand.
 Beauty never is real. Her face
 and reputation is now forever
 painted with the red blood of
 Trojans. What is that you say?
 You won? Your wooden Trojan Horse
 was cunning, but an insult to the
 Gods. Like you we saw it as a
 gift. Odysseus. You offended
 the Gods. They will have their
 revenge. You laugh. I defied
 Zeus. Paris did not die as a
 baby. He grew up. I welcomed him
 home and now I have paid my debt
 to the Gods. You will not outwit
 the Gods. Remember the golden
 apple competition. Paris ignored
 awarding the prize to the Goddess
 who would give him power. He
 turned his back on Athene. She
 offered wisdom and knowledge and
 then Paris gave the golden apple
 of the sun to Aphrodite - that
 loose unprincipled goddess of
 beauty. In exchange Paris got
 the heavenly Helen and war with
 Greece. Oh, yes... I loved her
 too. I wanted to send her back to
 Greece ten years ago - both bag
 and baggage, but how can a mother
 fight her sons and her husband
 and win? Those battles were lost
 in the womb.

HECUBA walks distractedly around the stage. She is tired and distressed.

HECUBA

Odysseus. I am your slave to do
 with as you will. My loyal
 spies have told me what happened.
 Polyxena, my youngest daughter
 was raped and executed. Her body
 lies at the tomb of Achilles,
 your so called greatest warrior.
 Such a mockery. The Gods did not
 protect either my beautiful Paris
 or your Achilles. Both dead.
 Achilles was a coward. He did not
 have the guts to fight my son
 Hector in a fair fight. He had
 him killed by mercenaries.

(MORE)

HECUBA (CONT'D)

Scowl, scowl as much as want
Odysseus. The dead voices soaking
in their blood will echo their
cries for a thousand years. And I
- Hecuba - once Queen of Troy -
mother to Hector, Paris, Troilus,
Cassandra, Polyxena will haunt
you. I will become the black
bitch dog of war. Blood on my
jaws will turn black from the
flesh of your dead soldiers.
Hands will become claws. Day and
night I will howl and howl. I
will be there at every war
forever to suck the blood and
tear the flesh of the dead and
the dying.

HECUBA howls and growls and moves around the stage like a
dog.

+THE END

THE END

THE END

THE END +