



## LOCAL ENTERTAINMENT

## "THE GREEKS"

by Leigh Romero

It was Greek Week for me last week. I'm not referring to non stop parties on Fraternity Row, but to the marathon undertaking at the BACK ALLEY Theatre in Van Nuys where artistic director Allan Miller has mounted nine classic plays running three separate nights. "The Greeks" tells the ancient tale of the House of Atreus. It might be likened to our modern tv shows "Dallas" or "Dynasty", in that the story details the intrigues, plots and doomed interrelationships between family members.

In the opening sequence of plays performed under the title, "The War," we are introduced to the principal players: Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus, ruled the kingdom of Argos together. They are married to sisters, Clytemnestra and Helen. When Paris of Troy comes to visit the country, he falls in love with Helen and the two of them steal back to Troy. To avenge this, Menelaus convinces Agamemnon to join him in sailing for Troy. Is this beginning to sound familiar? Because this is the most famous story of all our ancient literature, having been written over 2000 years ago. As such, the myths and stories that unfold in "The Greeks" provide the backbone for all of Western Civilizations' mores. From the point of Helen's abduction, "The Greeks" begins, depicting the war in Troy at home

The second evening, entitled "The Murders" shows the repercussions of causes Agamemnon made in order to win the war in Troy. (I'm surely not giving anything away by revealing that the Greeks win!) And on the last night, which wraps up all the stories and finally ends the trail of bloodshed with the aid and intervention of the gods, we are given a different view of the lives of the family of Atreus presented as a broad comedy.

Although surprising, there is precedent for this kind of comic relief: tragic trilogies were often followed by a Satyr play in ancient times. And the first section, "Helen," adapted from Euripides, lends itself well to a comic treatment. Arlene Golonka, as Helen, suns herself on a rock looking and talking every bit a witless Beverly Hills matron. The next two acts, "Orestes" and "Iphigenia in Tauris" do not fare as well in this mode, although the heavy involvement of the gods in sorting out the affairs of men is perhaps not as hokey this way. It even allows director Miller to throw in a revival number a la "Gospel at Colonnus."

The over all impact of the story taking place over the first two sections is involving. With the help of the chorus, a group of village women who comment on the action, give advice to the principals faced with monumental decisions and ponder the meaning of the gods, Agamemnon decides to sacrifice his daughter, Ighigenia; Clytemnestra becomes angered when Agamemnon brings home Cassandra as his mistress and plots to kill him; Orestes kills his mother for killing his father; his sister Electra is the crazy one of the family.

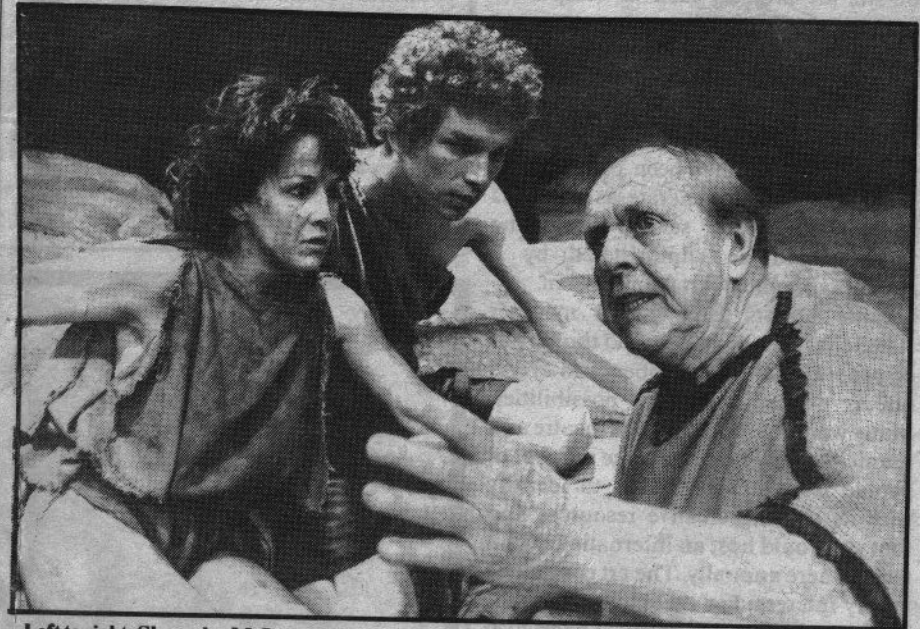
There are some good performances. Clytemnestra (Lisa Richards) brings power and grace to her role; Lynn Lowry as Ighigenia is a persuasive innocent; Fran Bennett as Hecuba and Christine Avila as Cassandra both know how to weave spellbinding webbs in their laments. As Menelaus, James Higgins

Millikan as Orestes and Andrew Robinson as Achilles are both fine. But for these, there are some uneven performers as well. Fortunately the principals carry us over these spots with the exception of Albert Paulsen in the pivotal role of Agamemnon. His is a bewildering performance, for he renders Agamemnon as a buffoon.

Production values for this production are excellent, with a fine setting of primitive stones serving as backdrop to the action, in an echo of the ancient amphitheatres, designed by Clifton Welch. Costumes by Armand Coutu, Terri H. Emilio and Ruth E. Carter are also good. But I wish something definite had been

worked out for the hair styles. Some of the women were authentic, but some, with shorter hair, made no effort to make themselves less contemporary. Music by David Cates is a triumph with a distinct greek flavor.

Seeing "The Greeks" in this abridgement reminds us what a short gap 2000 years really is, how fragile is the human condition. When you decide to see the series, there is the added advantage of buying tickets for two shows and getting the third one free. Please call the BACK ALLEY box office for more details: 780-2240. The BACK ALLEY THEATRE is located at 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.



Left to right: Sharonlee McLean, Alden Millikan, Bill Zuckert in THE GREEKS directed by Allan Miller