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# 'Greeks': watching civilization take shape

By Jay Reiner

Daily News Theater Critic

**W**ar, murder, human sacrifice and revenge; lust, pride, greed and revenge. Curses and prophecies, tears and lamentations. And more revenge.

So it was in Greek drama, and so it is in "The Greeks," the epic nine-play cycle now at the Back Alley Theater in Van Nuys. Adapters John Barton and Kenneth Cavendar have divided the plays into three trilogies, each one connected to the other by a strong central narrative, as well as several shared themes. The works of Euripides are the main textual source, with a play apiece from Sophocles and Aeschylus and one selection from Homer's "Iliad."

The result, except for the final trilogy, is not unlike an episodic serial with a series of tragic twists. In chapter one, Agamemnon must sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia if the gods are to allow his fleet to sail to Troy to avenge the abduction of Helen. In chapter two, Achilles sulks in his tent until moved to return to battle to avenge the death of his friend Patroclus. In chapter three, the Trojan women lament their fate as the spoils of war.

In later episodes, Hecuba, queen of Troy, avenges her son's death by blinding the king of Thrace. The next act of vengeance belongs to Clytemnestra, mother of Iphigenia, who prepares a bloodbath for her victorious husband, Agamemnon. Finally we meet Electra and Orestes, Agamemnon's other children, who avenge their father's murder by killing their mother

## STAGEVIEW

■ **What:** "The Greeks," adapted by John Barton and Kenneth Cavendar.

■ **Where:** Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys.

■ **Starring:** 35 actors; 90 costumes.

■ **Behind the scenes:** Directed by Allan Miller.

■ **When:** Part I plays at 8 p.m. Wednesdays and Saturdays; Part II, at 8 p.m. Thursdays, at 3 p.m. Sundays; Part III, at 8 p.m. Fridays and Sundays; through June 1.

■ **How much:** \$13 on Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday; \$15 on Friday and Saturday.

■ **For tickets:** Call (818) 780-2240.

A violent, blood-drenched story? Indeed. Meaningless barbarism? Not at all. What we are watching is nothing less than a civilization taking shape. Questions are asked: Who controls our fate, the gods or ourselves? To whom am I responsible, the gods, the state or myself? Is there a moral law beyond blood revenge?

Finally, in the last trilogy, a modern view is superimposed. Helen, Orestes and Iphigenia return to debunk the tragic-mythic underpinnings of the previous six plays: Don't take all that you've seen too seriously; these are stories made up by men, and the gods are merely useful fictions designed to justify our passions and explain our puzzlements.

This is an ambitious project to carry off, especially for an Equity-waiver theater. Director Allan Miller has neither the resources nor talent on hand to do so. In a cast of 35 with many parts doubled, only a



Judyann Elder and Fran Bennett in "The Greeks" at the Back Alley Theatre.

Fran Bennett's powerful Hecuba gives us some idea of what might have been. Christine Avila, Judyann Elder, Lisa Rich-

as the prophetess Cassandra, Andromache, Clytemnestra and a herald, respectively. The less said about most of