

Dining & Entertainment

Section

F

May 24, 1966

Tragedies a 'noble experiment'

'The Greeks' uneven but worthwhile

By EUGENE KENNETH HANSON
Special to The Desert Sun

LOS ANGELES — In the opening sentence of "Anna Karenina," Tolstoy wrote: "All happy families are alike, every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The house of Atreus of ancient Greek legend was unhappy in countless ways. Those miseries,

Theater review

those tragedies, are retold in the trilogy "The Greeks," playing at the Back Alley Theatre here through June 1.

Rather loosely translated by Kenneth Cavendar and adapted by Cavendar and John Barton from the original Greek plays and epic poetry of Euripides, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Homer, "The Greeks" follows the family of Atreus through the Trojan Wars, from the preparations to its sorry aftermath. Peopled with mere mortals, heroes, and assorted gods and goddesses, it follows the legendary struggle of the Greeks to recapture Helen, taken from her husband Menelaus by Paris, Prince of Troy. Along the way, many other tragedies befall this cursed family, all a result of grisly murders committed before the time of the plays by the father of the line, Atreus.

The trilogy consists of nine plays, each but the length of an act by itself, played in rotation on Wednesdays through Sundays. The production, unfortunately,

fails to live up to the fascinating potential inherent in such a conception. It is, nevertheless, a truly worthwhile venture, and a wonderful way to be steeped in that richest of all mythologies. The ancient Greeks gave the world more than tales; they gave everything from monumental insights into the nature of gods and men to the very forms of literature that the Western world enjoys.

On a simple stage setting (designed by Clifton R. Welch) that reproduces a rocky Mediterranean coast, only slight changes are necessary from play to play. The set is surely not unlike those in Athens some 2500 years ago, when the originals of most of these plays were first staged. Costume design (by Hilary Sloane) stays quite close to Greek fashions of the time, as known through classical art. The costumes very effectively suggest station and rank, and even a character's mood, as in the case of Electra.

It is in the direction (by Allan Miller), and in the performers' apparent uncertainties which grow out of the direction, that the play suffers most. (Although it must be said that the conception, in part, grows out of the translation of the materials.) At times the plays don't seem to know whether they are comedies, tragedies, or farces. Neither do the actors know for certain, so, too, the audience seems unsure. In places it almost appears an actor is clowning, or grandstanding.

the ancient Greeks, at their festivals, wanted humor, they had it in their comedies and satyr plays. These stories are tragedies, serving slaughtered sons to an unsuspecting father at a banquet, sacrificing a beloved daughter to the gods who control the winds, murdering a mother who has just killed her husband, waging a 10-year war to rescue a beautiful wife. Even if American audiences do prefer their entertainment light, to allow the tragic to be treated in a comic fashion is simply morbid. Not all of "The Greeks" is treated this way to be sure, but even isolated moments are enough to destroy the sober mood created by such somber stories.

The acting surely suffered because of the confusion and misdirection. And, however experienced the performers — all their credits are impressive — just to gather a cast of some 30 persons for a demanding production like this is in itself an almost impossible task. Thus, the unevenness is often painfully apparent. Albert Paulsen, as Agamemnon, seems intent on creating some kind of accent for his character. It never quite does. Arlene Golor as Helen of Troy, though beautiful, is surely worth a more formidable armada than the 1000 launched by the face of the real Helen. What is more exciting is her Marilyn interpretation of the character Helen.

By no means are all the performers weak. Andrew Rob as Achilles is a strong, and stiff-willed hero. Alden Millik as Orestes is convincing as he kills matricide and then just the way in which he carries the family tradition of blood. His sister Electra (Shari McLean) is an untamed and her grief over the loss of a mother and a father, and in her attempt to see her father's death avenged. Briseis (Rose Parahi), Achilles' beautiful mistress, is as obstinate and pious as she is lovely. Her life is passed from hand to hand among her captors. And she Clytemnestra (Lisa Richardson) is remarkable as mother, wife, lover, with all the conflicting emotions that grip her.

"The Greeks" is far from resounding success, but deserves more than polite notice. It is a truly noble experiment, well-deserving of a close look.

Eugene Kenneth Hanson
teacher at College of the Siskiyous
holds a doctorate in theater