

Around the Valley

'I'm glad they finally killed Agamemnon off'

Back Alley Theatre of Van Nuys, which is said by critics to be one of the better small theaters in Los Angeles, invited the critics to come by Sunday to see its most ambitious project yet, a nine-play condensation of the Greek dramatic writings on the fall of Troy.

The three-part epic cycle, called "The Greeks," consists of recent translations of plays by Euripides, Sophocles and Aeschylus as well as bits of Homer. It won critical praise as originally produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

I dropped by not as a critic. The city's drama critics nearly filled the equity waiver house and my contribution was obviously not needed.

My aim was personal. I was attracted by my vague, but still curiously compelling, recollections of the Greeks' poetic rhapsodies in striving to come to terms with things they could not understand.

Although a lot has been explained since the time when Zeus and the Furies took the blame for everything, some knowledge seems to be as elusive as ever — the nature of good and evil, for example.

I attended the second part of the production, titled "The Murders." Murder is a still a current topic, and we hardly understand it any better than the Greeks did.

The play that interested me was Aeschylus' tragedy "Agamemnon." It tells the story of the Greek general's murder by his wife, Clytemnestra, upon his triumphant return from conquered Troy. Greed, jealousy and illicit love all contribute to the plot. But mostly it is Clytemnestra's desire to avenge the sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia,



by Agamemnon when the gods granted no wind for the Greek armada's journey to Troy.

Twenty years after reading the play, I still distinctly recall the shrill power of "Agamemnon's" chorus in its commentary of delirious, fractured sentences like this one, which I looked up before going to the play:

"Their cry of war went shrill from the heart, as eagles stricken in agony for young perished, high from the nest eddy and circle to bend and sweep of the wing's stroke, lost far below the fledglings, the nest, and the tendance."

Even the person who has never conquered, murdered or carried slaves home from war knows something of Agamemnon's dilemma between the life of his daughter, "the beauty of my house," and the demands of the sulking Achaeans "when no ship sailed, no pail was full."

Even those whose 10,000 ships are, in reality, nothing more than the demands of an employer know well how it feels to wonder, "How shall I fail my ships and lose my faith of battle?"

I hoped that a shot of Greek catharsis might do some good for my faith of battle.

When I arrived at Back Alley Theatre, whose front door is at the back of a small alley off Burbank Boulevard, the seats were mostly taken and a few people still stood outside eating cookies and lunch meats and chatting amiably.

"Five minutes," a young man said, and we all went inside.

The play wasn't 10 minutes old when I knew it was not what I expected.

The chorus had been dismantled. Saying the chorus lines were three women in loose, drab gowns who took turns speaking as loud and fast as they could with their hands thrust skyward toward Zeus.

Agamemnon was, in the words of The Times critic, like "a Teyve clone in fancy dress worrying about his daughters."

A radio critic next to me, who wore a black beret, said it wasn't as bad as it looked. Though she thought that the acting was sometimes terrible, the choreography non-existent and the direction weak, she still found the story as compelling as I did.

"You can't help sitting here like a sap listening," she said.

Anyway, "They've been feeding us generously," she said.

"Oreos and all," the man beside her said.

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VALLEY NEWS

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By DOUG SMITH

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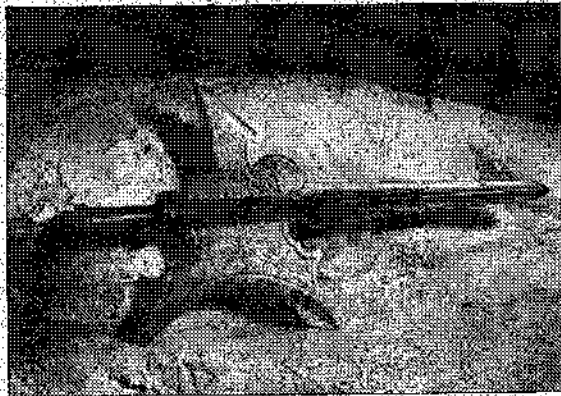
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funny.

This evinced itself with a few titters as
Agamemnon's death cries ripped across the stage
from the wings.

"I'm glad they finally killed Agamemnon off,"
the radio critic said.

"It would have been nicer if they could have
killed him off in the first act," the man who liked
Oreos replied.

"You mean when I threatened to kill him,"
the critic said.

Later, laughter broke out in earnest when
Clytemnestra's children, Elektra and Orestes,
amid much shrieking and arm-flinging, avenged
their father's death at the end of the play "Elektra."

"That's a lot of screaming and yelling," one
woman said while walking swiftly away with
the rest of the crowd. "It tired me out."

It had tired the actors out too.

Afterward, they sat quietly for half an hour
behind the stage, ravaging tins of grape leaves
given them by a nearby Greek restaurant.

While eating his plate, director Allan Miller
explained the play.

Miller said he had broken up the chorus to
increase interaction with the audience and also
encouraged the humor to relieve the intensity
of the drama.

He promised that the third part, "The Gods,"
would be even funnier, along the lines of "A Funny
Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum,"
reflecting the later Greek dramatists' loss of faith
in the myths.

I think I'll just read the plays again. I still believe
the myths.