

## THEATRE REVIEWS



Arlene Golonka and Rose Parrah  
in 'The Greeks' at the Back Alley

## The Greeks

BY T. H. McCULLOH

Produced by Laura Zucker; Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; (818) 780-2240. Opened April 23; three plays in repertory, Wed.-Sat., 8; Sun., 3 & 8; runs indefinitely; call theatre for times and dates.

Until the middle of the 19th century scholars, historians and casual observers knew that Troy was the stuff of legend. Then the phenomenal Heinrich Schliemann, who knew it existed, dug up an innocent looking mound and found its gold, making of Troy not legend but history (and making himself the father of modern archeology). He also discovered Mycenae, fulfilling the truth of most of the rest of the "legend" of Troy. It gave new credence to the plays of Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles (much like the "history" plays of Shakespeare) and the chronicles of Homer and the father of history, Herodotus. Then the Royal Shakespeare Company had John Barton and Kenneth Cavendar adapt for the stage Cavendar's original translation from the Greek and it comes out very much like the Bard's histories, original, fresh, humorous and delightful.

These truths are self-evident in close examination of this much delayed production at the Back Alley. What is not evident is what must have been the originality and inventiveness of the lauded RSC production. Where the London company found gold, as did Schliemann, in the juvenile but deadly earnest carryings-on on the east coast of the Aegean Sea and its aftermath and lore, director Allan Miller finds what all diggers before Schliemann found, shards of ruined but insignificant civilizations, stained cups and grubby dishes from the ghettos of history and of theatre.

There is a rich vein of humor in the Barton-Cavendar *Greeks* but this company finds it only in pratfalls and slapsticks, physical and verbal. What the civilization in question had, what the adaptation has and obviously what the RSC had, is style. This production has only stile, something to climb over into the next pasture, and be careful when you do it. There is rarely a line read with any realization of what the line means or any reason for its utterance. There is rarely any comprehension of what humor is inherent in the writing or how to translate it into theatrical terms. Some fine actors are at a loss as to what to do with the material and, considering the fact they all do the same thing, it must be attributed to the directorial concept.

*The Greeks*, in seven and a half hours, comprises: Part I, *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Achilles*, and *The Trojan Women*; Part II, *Hecuba*, *Agamemnon*, and *Electra*; Part III, *Helen*, *Orestes*, and *Iphigenia in Taurus*. A heaping plate of *moussaka* on anyone's menu. But the first hint of what the whole thing is about occurs at the beginning of Part III with a long monologue by Arlene Golonka as the irrefutable Helen (who wasn't, she says, really responsible for the war although "it seems I'm destructive") and, though she goes somewhat overboard in an attempt to revive the viewers of Parts I & II, she makes it work. Oddly, the company follows suit. One wonders why they were so lost in the first three plus hours. Golonka gets a bow and a bouquet for her charm, insight and courage.

There are others who seem to understand or attempt an attempt. Judyann Elder's *Athene* delivers a great revival sermon and, discounting her hemlock-induced arm routines, Sharonlee McLean's *Electra* has moments. So does Alden Milliken's *Orestes*, although he's hamstrung by the physical and emotional slapstick he's given. Michael Holmes smiles a lot (for some unknown reason or method) as *Talthybius*, but at least reads his lines logically, as does Fran Bennett as *Hecuba*, out of sync though she be and winning a burlesque laugh with her vocal take as the body of her son is carried off stage.

There are also those who don't understand (and we don't understand why) the thrust of the piece or the style which would make it work. They include Andrew Robinson as *Achilles*, in the belly of the battle but at the heel of the hero; Chris Hendrie, miscast both as *Patroclus* (more uncle than "friend" of *Achilles*) and *Apollo* (less God of Light than light of god); and the bumbling performance of Albert Paulsen, doing *Mel Brooks* and not well, as *Agamemnon* (the king is over 2,000 years old but that shouldn't be

the actor's clue to characterization or for inept line readings); and the phony, campy *Thoas* of Darryl Roach; and then there is the *After School Special* *Iphigenia* of Lynn Lowry.

But there is also the solid though unstylish *Odysseus* of John C. McLaughlin and the dandy late in the day goofiness of James Higgins' *Menelaus*, but they are tempered by the *Solid Gold* Age goddesses and Greek women of various ladies and Alex Statler's soapy *Pylades*, none of whom are anywhere near the Aegean nor the pointed humor of this telling of that sea's tales.

It is a company looking for a concept and a production of an interesting and amusing adaptation of nine classics looking for an idea. Director Miller might have had a hint from Clifton R. Welch's Pillsbury refrigerator biscuit setting, which seems to rise after every intermission, or from David Kates' excellent and probably unintentionally funny score which seems more a commercial for *Zorba*, which also opened this week, than a tongue in cheek mood setter for this giant, chortling parable from a civilization at which we might take a closer look. Greg R. McCullough's lighting helps the biscuits

rise and Leonora Schildkraut's sound reverberates with the puffing and huffing of biscuit and cast. The costumes by Armand Coutu and Hilary Sloane have little to do with Greece or Troy, peasant or noble, and make little sense until Golonka wobbles across the biscuits in spike heels. That's funny, and makes a point. But so does she. The rest is pointless, so beware of *Greeks'* boring gifts.