

'Greeks' launches a thousand flops

Theatrical struggle at the Back Alley is guilty of hubris

By Richard Stayton
Herald theater critic

Is this the face that launched a thousand ships?

Is this Homer's "lord of men," the "powerful" king of all the Greek forces, Agamemnon?

They are if you're consulting Central Casting and using for reference modern interpretations of the Greek classics like "Hercules Unchained." That's the cumulative effect of the Back Alley's incredibly shallow three-part production, "The Greeks," which attempts to make

current nine adaptations of Greek tragedies. It's a noble but overly ambitious struggle that falls woefully short of an ideal experience.

Granted, Joseph E. Levine might have more to say to Southern Californians than scholars H.D.F. Kitto and Richmond Lattimore. And perhaps the most relevant and closest in overall effect to the original impact of the 500 B.C. tragedies is indeed our sitcom. After all, no less an expert on the subject than W.H. Auden wrote: "The nearest modern equivalent (to Athenian drama) is not any work of the theater, but a ball game or a

bullfight."

If that's the criterion, then director Allan Miller resembles a torador in a hurricane, with his enormous cast reminiscent of bulls let loose on the streets of Pamplona.

"The Greeks" was originally produced in 1979 at the Aldwych Theater in London by the Royal Shakespeare Company. RSC Director John Barton and translator Kenneth Cavander freely adapted 10 classic Athenian plays and one section from Homer's "Iliad." Seven selections were from the most modern Greek tragedian, Euripides, one each by Sophocles and Aeschylus. Their aim was to explore the legends and myths surrounding the fall of Troy.

"What if (a Greek play) was given a simple, lucid, terse translation and a light, non-indulgent, non-tragic production style?" Barton asked at the time.

Such a question might prove challenging and provocative when performed by a true ensemble like the RSC. But when tackled by conventional actors with an insufficient rehearsal period, the event gives all-too-familiar meaning to the Greek word "Kaos."

In addition, director Miller and his company have cut entirely one of the RSC adaptations (Euripides' "Andromache"), while taking considerable liberties with Cavander's translation. The improvisations undermine all sense of linkage to an ancient era, while the deliveries lack all connection to the text's verse.

But the Back Alley's "Greeks" is distinguished by a plethora of



Arlene Golonka brings a "Fantasy Island" aura to her portrayal of Helen in "The G

missed lines and by the immense burden of Albert Paulsen's accidentally satirical Agamemnon, who is regrettably not killed off until the fifth play.

Then there's Arlene ("Mayberry RFD") Golonka's Helen, contorting Grecian mythology into the canned imagery of "Fantasy Island."

Even in the midst of chaos, some talent thrives. It's a genuine treat to watch a consummate professional like Andrew Robinson (Achilles) toss off Paulsen to occupy his own stage space. And in the cycle's most successful works — Euripides' "The Trojan Women" and Sophocles' "Electra" — four actresses excel: Fran Bennett, Judyann Elder, Sharonlee McLean and Elicia Laport.

In particular, Sharonlee McLean's Elektra inhabits her role with a primitive, hypnotic vitality, signaling the arrival of a major

talent.

But these are the only major aspects of a decidedly minor evening that is desperately in need of an Aristophanes.

THE GREEKS, nine Greek plays adapted by John Barton and Kenneth Cavander, directed by Allan Miller; set by Clifton R. Welch; lights by Greg R. McCullough; costumes by Armand Coutu, Terri H. Emilio and Ruth E. Carter; original score composed by David Kates; sound by Leonora Schildkraut; choreography by Lynne Marta; produced by Laura Zucker at the Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys, 8 p.m. Wed-Sun, 3 p.m. Sun. Tickets \$13-\$15. Information: (818) 780-2240.

Achilles.....	Andrew Robinson
Agamemnon.....	Albert Paulsen
Helen.....	Arlene Golonka
Cassandra.....	Christine Avila
Hecuba.....	Fran Bennett
Andromache/Athene.....	Judyann Elder
Odysseus.....	John C. McLaughlin
Clytemnestra.....	Lisa Richards
Electra.....	Sharonlee McLean
Chrysothemis.....	Elicia Laport