

STAGE REVIEW

MIXED BAG OF 'GREEKS'
AT BACK ALLEY THEATRE

By SYLVIE DRAKE,
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In the continual search for ways to make literature more immediate, alive, accessible, John Barton (an associate director of England's Royal Shakespeare Company) and translator Kenneth Cavander came up with the capital idea a few years ago of humanizing those remote, emotive ancient Greeks. Would it work? It would.

Cavander/Barton's abridged version of 10 Greek tragedies (mostly by Euripides with a splash of Sophocles, Aeschylus and even

Homer) offer a chronology of the houses of Atreus and Tantalus.

These are not what you'd call resplendent family histories, but dramatic and enlightening and, in this version (which covers Iphigenia in Aulis, the Trojan War, the Trojan Women, the Agamemnon/Clytemnestra murders and a surprise comical ending with the gods in Tauris), often unexpected and even funny.

The plays were successfully offered as a trilogy—"The War," "The Murders," "The Gods," collectively called "The Greeks"—by

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INSIDE CALENDAR

ART: "Bob & Bob: A Retrospective, 1975-1986" reviewed by Colin Gardner. Page 3.

TV: Tonight on TV and cable. Page 8.

Actress Kathy Bates listening to discussion of suicide in seminar that followed performance of "night, Mother" at Taper Forum. Page 5.



Jane Romney, Gladys Holland, Michael Holmes, top, from left; Lisa Richards, Lynn Lowry, Albert Paulsen, front, from left, in "Iphigenia in Aulis" at the Back Alley.



'GREEKS' A MIXED BAG AT BACK ALLEY

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the Royal Shakespeare in 1979. In 1982, Connecticut's Hartford Stage presented the American premiere, a distinguished nine-play version of this intriguing marathon.

Now, after months of preparation, the Back Alley Theatre in Van Nuys has thrown its Equity Waiver hat into the ring. But from the very opening of Part I ("The War"), when a rag-tag band of goddesses, demi-goddesses and just plain womenfolk dish (often incomprehensibly) about life in ancient Greece, perched on the precarious boulders of Clifton R. Welch's multipurpose set, you suspect something is amiss.

The gods, it seems want Agamemnon to kill his daughter Iphigenia in exchange for fair winds to Troy. By the time Albert Paulsen's Agamemnon makes his entrance, moving and sounding like a Tevye clone in fancy dress worrying about his daughters, you know this show's in trouble.

Eight plays later (playlets, really, especially at the Back Alley, where director Allan Miller has pared down the pared-down versions even more), it's clear that what we have is "The Greeks Go to Hollywood"—a production so Contemporary Pedestrian, so lacking in point of view or artistic identity, that when someone asks, "Did anybody see Ajax?" one half expects a box of cleanser to appear.

Miller and his "cast of 35" have confused humanizing with trivializing and quality with quantity. It would have been wiser to stick to actors who could carry the language and style and to double up on roles, as did Hartford and the RSC.

At the Back Alley "The Greeks" becomes a kind of burlesque, largely performed by actors who haven't a clue about what to do with their bodies or voices or hair (styles range from wild and woolly to moussed modern). They mistake parody for humor and allow themselves lethal indulgences: plenty of mugging, of course, but the subtler corruption of infatuation with their own cleverness as ad-libbers. This, as it so often does, becomes contagious—the few infecting the many.

The plays never recover.

If things go downhill, however, they don't do it in a straight line. This "Greeks" offers a maddeningly mixed bag of scenes that work, inextricably bound to scenes that don't. There are isolated episodes of great power and they happen when peopled with actors who have the craft and talent to sustain them—such as the superlative Hecuba of

Fran Bennett, the more erratic but capable Clytemnestra of Lisa Richards, Michael Holmes' intelligent Talthybius or Christine Avila's restrained, lucid Cassandra.

Yet far too few of the actors can deliver and director Miller, saddled with the unenviable responsibility of keeping this unmanageable lot just moving forward, has left uncharacteristically glaring holes in his staging.

Everyone handles the baby Orestes more like a bundle than a baby (though the audible crying, for once, is real); much ado about "Hector's child" is poorly handled though not badly acted; when the body of little Astyanax is brought on after being dashed from the top of Troy's battlements, it is strangely unmussed, despite references to wounds; and can this really be Andrew Robinson (so memorable in the Taper's "Belly of the Beast" last year) playing this egocentric, manic, eminently foolish Achilles?

Annoying though they may be, these blemishes are minor irritants. There is a much more fundamental neglect of navigational skills that sets these "Greeks" adrift without a rudder. Somewhere along the line, intent and text were tossed overboard in favor of laughs at any price. That price is high.

As much in Cavander's introduction to the text as in his program notes, it's clear "The Greeks" is about *something*, mostly about doubt and the error of man's (and woman's) way. It's about the human responsibility he'd like to pin on wayward gods, and the egocentricity and uselessness of war. That's the serious undercurrent. It cries to be respected.

Respect never happens at the Back Alley where it's clear that resources are stretched past the breaking point. The subtle humor in the piece is turned on its ear.

Helen of Troy at the hands of Arlene Golonka becomes a Judy Holliday version of Liz Taylor running amok with ad-libs (greatly encouraged, one should add, by Sunday's audience). It's a crowd-pleasing but wrongheaded turn.

Cheap pop psychology is applied to the struggling Electra (Sharonlee Mclean) and Clytemnestra's insistence that Agamemnon walk on the tapestries she has laid out for him degenerates (intentionally, I fear) into a low-level family squabble. This is partly born of the script's own determination to be pedestrian on occasion, but when it is accompanied by stridency or amateurishness, it fulfills quite a

different purpose.

Technically speaking, Welch's set is effective if a bit wobbly at times, but too many of Armand Coutu's and Hilary Sloane's eclectic costumes look like a RITualized collection of Salvation Army leftovers. Leonora Schildkraut's sound of lapping waves tends to drown out the actors and while we "hear" the seacoast, Greg R. McCullough's lighting does nothing to suggest it.

David Kates has composed an original score that is part modern taverna music, part something else. It, like so much of the rest of this production, seems to be a half-effort that, like the characters in these histories, loses its way somewhere along the line.

By the time we get to Part III, where the pitch of stridency and perversion of humor climax early and long (we have a revivalist Goddess Athena and a King of Tauris who stomps his feet with glee), there is absolutely nowhere for this "Greeks" to go.

In fact, the jig was up long ago, minutes into Part I, when everything strongly suggested that this time the Back Alley, one of our strongest Waiver theaters, was in over its head and, like the heroes and heroines of these tragedies, out of control. Performances at 15231 Burbank Blvd. in Van Nuys end June 1. Call theater for schedule (818-780-2240).