

## New Reviews

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## Theater

**THE GREEKS** Virtually everyone who loves theater loves the 33 extant plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides — the descendants of the original visionary poets who invented the pantheistic, communal religious ritual; most theater professionals lament the seeming impossibility of producing the ancient texts to resonate in our post-Nietzschean, postmodern, postliterate age. Classicist Kenneth Cavender and John Barton, associate director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, thought they came up with a viable adaptation when they took nine of the plays based on the heroic tales of the Trojan War, linked them with material from Homer's *The Iliad* and grouped them into three chronological and ideological sections. They may have been right, but we'll never know. Director Allan Miller (no friend of subtlety) has plundered the Cavender/Barton text and churned out a *Reader's Digest* "epic" that ultimately reduces the metaphysics of the Greeks — and of *The Greeks* — to the aesthetic level of *Hee-Haw*. A noble and ambitious undertaking with moments of genuine passion, this *Greeks* is — generally speaking — a badly spoken steamroller of antiheroic attitudinizing that flattens the moral concerns of the primal source material into an incoherent pancake.

**Part I: The War.** Consisting of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Trojan Women* with a slice of Homer's *Iliad* sandwiched between, Part I sets the moral tone and feminist consciousness of Greek drama (the relatively recent patriarchy expressing an unconscious nostalgia for the matriarchal order it supplanted?) with the story of Helen and her abduction by Paris, the fate of Achilles and the fall of Troy. Featuring strong acting by Andrew Robinson (Achilles), Fran Bennett (Hecuba) and Judyanna Elder (Andromache), this two-hour hunk of mythic history offers the most

faithful echoes of Greek tragedy. It also parades the execrable acting of Albert Paulsen as Agamemnon. The section is off the mark, but it's in the ballpark. Like the opening movement of a symphony, it states all the themes and promises rich emotional and intellectual reward (despite the lead violin having come directly from his first lesson).

**Part II: The Murders.** The only section that draws from each of the three extant tragedians, "The Murders" includes *Hecuba* by Euripides, *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus and *Electra* by Sophocles (in that order). Raced through in 90 minutes (with two intermissions), these abridgments are too fast and too short to pack any emotional wallop whatever, particularly as Paulsen is back to spoil two of them and Bennett's *Hecuba* is over the edge under Miller's loose rein. Sharonlee McLean makes a fine stab at *Electra* (reduced here to a kind of wild child out of *Playboy* magazine), and Alden Millikan as her brother Orestes matches her, but neither director nor adaptors have dirtied their fingers much with the major philosophical differences among the playwrights on the knotty — and central — matter of the Olympic deities and their involvement in human affairs.

**Part III: The Gods.** The Dionysian festivals of 5th-century B.C. Athens had their satyr plays to serve as comic relief; *The Greeks* has Miller's all-out burlesque of *Helen*, *Orestes* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, all by Euripides (the production omits *Andromache* from the RSC version). Casting sitcom blonde Arlene Gofonka as Helen of Troy was a tipoff to impending irreverence and the actress does not disappoint as a bimbo of classic dimension. Although occasionally funny — usually cheaply funny — Part III completely fails to grapple with the fundamental questions of gods, choice, free will and necessity; the words are there, but not the essence. (In this regard it is perhaps a weakness of the entire enterprise to draw so heavily on Euripides, an iconoclastic "deconstructionist" of the conservative Aeschylus and Sophocles, although it is clear that Euripides is closer to our modern skepticism.) As a play, *Iphigenia in Tauris* ends in forgiveness and poetry; here, it is a thumb-to-the-nose undergraduate spoof. *The Greeks* is many things that Greek theater was and western civilization is. It lacks only beauty, grace, grandeur, spirit, soul and the restless intelligence of its creators. All the baser elements survive in spades. The Back Alley Theater, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys; Part I Wed. & Sat., 8 p.m.; Part II Thurs., 8 p.m. & Sun., 3 p.m.; Part III Fri. & Sun., 8 p.m.; thru June 1. Call (818) 780-2240. (Michael Lessall)