

REVIEW

'Greeks' fights clock in 1

By JANET NORSE

There is much to admire in the Back Alley Theatre's production of "The Greeks," even if much of it misfires.

Eight plays about the Trojan War by Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles, and an excerpt from Homer's "Iliad," have been translated by Kenneth Cavendar and adapted by John Barton with Cavendar into a three-play cycle. The three are playing in rotating repertory.

Apparently feeling a need to compress so much material into a short time (none of the plays is more than two hours long), Allan Miller has directed the production at a nearly fatal fast pace. There are few moments of slowness or subtlety; most emotions are played full-steam from curtain to curtain.

The production presents the anguished questioning of gods

STAGE

and humanity by two brilliant cultures in the aftermath of a destructive war; but without reflection, or time to establish deep sorrow, this becomes an almost farcical piling up of catastrophes. (At one point in "The Trojan Women," Hecuba literally has to interrupt her own screaming about her city to begin screaming about her grandson's fate.)

The third play suddenly turns to satire, as if Miller were following the ancient Greek tradition of a mocking satyr play after the tragedies. Now the breakneck pace becomes an asset; but the transition is too complete and baffling.

In one play, Electra is por-



Ann Lauren, left, Jeanne Sal

WHAT'S SHOWING

osing battle with tone



kata, Arlene Golonka and Rose Parrah in 'Greeks'

trayed as a driven, tragically obsessed woman, and in another as a farcical, carping shrew. Either interpretation could be defended; both, portrayed by the same actress in the same costume, are just confusing.

Some excellent performances do emerge in "The Greeks." Lisa Richards' Clytemnestra is a clear, spare portrayal. Andrew Robinson, in an amazing change from the shattered wreck he portrayed in "Belly of the Beast," plays Achilles as a self-centered but charming and able hunk.

Michael Holmes is completely convincing as Talthybius, a Greek herald. Unfortunately, Albert Paulsen cannot manage the sweep or complexity of Agamemnon, portraying him as a befuddled but basically

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nice guy.

Fran Bennett and Judyann Elder are strong and touching as Queen Hecuba and her daughter-in-law Andromache. Christine Avila and Sharonlee McLean, playing Cassandra and Electra, respectively, bring calm, intensity and intelligence to these tricky roles. (Why does Miller let Cassandra's final exit, to her doom, be trampled on by others' lines?)

Arlene Golonka's Helen, in the satirical play, is a delicious, coy, narcissistic creature with great physical and vocal freedom. Her sensuality could certainly have been used earlier in "The Trojan Women." Surely, if no one else knew how to use sex as a survival tool, Helen did. But she's played as tragically as Medea.

Daryl Roach plays three kings (all thwarted by women) with flair. In the end, it's the frenetic pacing that really thwarts him: his final speech, potentially powerful and anarchic, has been directed as a long temper tantrum.

Alden Millikan well portrays a very youthful Orestes, though he has little time to explore Orestes' guilt before the farce starts up. Diane Heyden is convincing and passionate in a very short role.

Jeanne Sakata, Rose Parrah and Ann Lauren are standouts among several women cast members who play multiple parts. Lauren responds to Greek myths with the fervor of a Pentecostal Christian hearing Scripture.

Technically, the show is excellent. The costumes, designed by Armand Coutu, Terri H. Emilio and Ruth E. Carter, are a visual feast. Clifton R. Welch's set adapts well to all the play's settings. A striking original score by David Kates adds to the production.

"The Greeks" continues through June 1 at the Back Alley Theatre, 15231 Burbank Blvd., Van Nuys. Call (818) 780-2240 for information.