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Greek To Us

In an ambitious nine-play cycle of ancient Greek drama, the Back Alley Theater merges myth and history for a modern audience.

by Richard M. Finder

It has been said that every century attempts to re-create Greek theatre—the idea of theatre as the fullest possible poetic expression, as set forth by Aristotle in his *Poetics*. The ideals include unities of space and time, the sound of words themselves, scenery, music, story and music. Of course, no one really wants to see Euripides' works played by bellowing chanters carrying masks. Technologies change, but the dream remains.

The satire of Aristophanes and fantasies (as we see them) of Aeschylus need freshening from time to time; political parties do change over a couple of thousand years, but Euripides, unchanged, still rivets the attention

of a house.

Now the re-invention process has begun again, with new translations by Kenneth Cavender adapted by Cavender and John Barton, via the Back Alley Theatre. Producer Laura Zucker and director Allan Miller, two who never backed off from a challenge, are presenting nine plays in a kind of marathon. It is highly recommended that they be seen on successive nights.

It is desirable to keep one's concentration between shows. The stuff of these plays is the essence of the noblest and worst in mankind. Within the plays themselves, the Greek chorus (as is usual today, spoken by actual characters), argues whether the universe runs on blind chance, or whether "...there is a morality

which binds even the gods."

To the Greeks themselves, and hidden within the legends upon which these nine playlets are based, there is a third possibility: The gods are indeed bound by morality but there is a random factor at work, a kind of Murphy's Law, personified as the minor deity Dis (Strife).

Before the famous abduction of Helen by Paris which began the siege of Troy, Dis had a golden apple made to be presented to "the fairest of the fair." Three goddesses competed for the prize (it was understood that it was the power of the goddesses over men's minds which was really being judged): Hera, nominal chief of female deities; Athena, goddess of wisdom; and Aphrodite, who was chosen by

▶31

▶24

Hecuba's children are killed the Trojan women of the houses are carried into captivity. Incidentally, in this masculine of worlds, the tresses are particularly outstanding, notably Arlene Golon, Helen, Fran Bennett as Helena, and Sharonea MacLean, as the ravaged beauty, Electra.

Menelaus) at the siege of Troy, sacrificing his innocent, loving daughter, Iphigenia, in hopes of gaining favor of the gods. The play, of course, is ill-fated, and as much as the golden apple itself (which took place before the cycle of plays began, and was known in detail to every Greek theater-goer), this cruel murder will itself beget murders even crueler. Upon his return from Troy, Agamemnon will be caught in a net and slain by his wife, Clytemnestra, when her son Orestes returns, will be killed along with her lovers and

Paris, was goddess of sex. Each deity had a dark side, often represented by their having two names. If Phoebus Apollo gave the twin gifts of music and prophecy, he was also cruel and indifferent (and the more so his twin sister, Artemis, protectress of virgins while also goddess of the hunt, and a particularly vengeful deity). For success in warfare, the deity best invoked was Athena, goddess of wisdom and science, for as

Greeks

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Paris, was goddess of sex.

Each deity had a dark side, often represented by their having two names. If Phoebus Apollo gave the twin gifts of music and prophecy, he was also cruel and indifferent (and the more so his twin sister, Artemis, protectress of virgins while also goddess of the hunt, and a particularly vengeful deity). For success in warfare, the deity best invoked was Athena, goddess of wisdom and science, for as Pallas Athena she delighted in the science of warfare, and having taught Theseus how to slay the Gorgon, wore the Gorgon's head on her shield, so that her enemies were frozen when she lifted it.

T first play begins with the propitiation of the Olympians, and it is this, more than the barbarous Trojan War itself, which is to be the undoing of the protagonists. *Iphegenia In Aulis*

brings us the pitiless spectacle of Agamemnon, co-general (with Menelaus) at the siege of Troy, sacrificing his innocent, loving daughter, Iphegenia, in hopes of gaining favor of the gods.

The play, of course, is ill-fated, and as much as the golden apple itself (which took place before the cycle of plays began, and was known in detail to every Greek theater-goer), this cruel murder will itself beget murders even crueler. Upon his return from Troy, Agamemnon will be caught in a net and slain by his wife, Clytemnestra, when her son Orestes returns, will be killed along with her lovers and courtiers by Orestes and his grief-mad sister, Electra.

Sex, violence and all manner of excess are the norms at the site of the war itself. The *Iliad* (from which the second play is adapted) begins with the wrath of the goddess-born Achilles. His concubine, Briseis, herself a war-prize, was taken by Agamemnon, whereupon Achilles allows his fellows to be slaughtered by the Trojans without lifting a sword.

In a hair-raising finish to the first cycle of three plays, Queen Hecuba's children are killed, and the Trojan women of the ruling houses are carried into captivity. Incidentally, in this most masculine of worlds, the actresses are particularly outstanding, notably Arlene Golonka as Helen, Fran Bennett as Hecuba, Sharonlea MacLean, as the grief-ravaged beauty, Electra.

From an Olympian perspective, all the human endeavor, all the treachery, lechery and blood emotions, become a joke of more-than-human dimensions. Indeed, more than Olympian size, for Apollo puts in a brief appearance and behold!—beneath his vaunted beauty he's just a super-bully. Nothing is what it has seemed to be, with the result that the entire war, the feuds within and outside the families, all were at best to amuse the gods or perhaps not even that much; the gods themselves became tired of our doings.

Seeing part three without having attended the preceding two parts is not worthwhile. One really must start at the beginning, with the awful spectacle of a father sacrificing his own daughter for the sake of war. The third humorous cycle is free from the first two. And, once one becomes caught up in the cycle (almost immediately, the classic works form a compelling reality. Although the translation and adaptations are questionable (especially pulling out pieces from the *Iliad*), Homer liked to spin a good yarn, and the classic Greeks well understood that before you can teach a

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quity is itself very exciting.
Kudos go to the set and costume designers in keeping with the spirit of Greek theatre. There is good, unobtrusive, original score by David Kates, sound design by Leonora Schildkraut, one of the best in the business. But how much more we have to thank the visions of the classic Greeks, whose ever-fresh ideas compel us to this very day.

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