

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

For These Greeks, Hollywood's Illusion is a Natural Fit

Adam Leipzig · Thursday, September 6th, 2012

“You Greeks!” exclaims a man, dressed suspiciously like Kim Jong-Un. “Democracy! Philosophy! *Thee-a-tuh!*”

The man is Theoclymenus, played with derisive petulance by Chil Kong, dictator of a tiny island where Helen has been stranded for 17 years, since the beginning of the Trojan War. Theoclymenus is frustrated; he’s wanted to marry Helen all these years, and she’s almost in his grasp – but for the pesky detail of having to do a ritual burial for her husband at sea.

The ritual is a ruse; Menelaos, Helen’s husband, isn’t really dead – he’s washed ashore by coincidence, and the ritual will allow Helen to escape with him.

Where are we? Mythic Greece, and also mythic Hollywood – smoothly combined at the Getty Villa, presenting its seventh annual amphitheatre production in the favorable Malibu air.



The Getty doesn’t let ancient Greeks stay dead. To their credit they take artistic risks, whether it’s Culture Clash’s Aristophanes, or SITI Company’s *Trojan Women* (which will play at BAM in November).

This year, playwright Nick Salamone adapts Euripides’ *Helen* to a context we understand without ever losing its Greek-ness. The Playwrights’ Arena production, its multicultural cast fluidly directed by Jon Lawrence Rivera, is full of delicious anachronisms – references to Hollywood’s Golden Age and grenades sit side-by-side with imprecations against ancient gods. The play sets its own rules and its own vocabulary, and adheres to them with remarkable coherence.

Anachronisms are not anachronistic in classical Greek plays (they were its bread and butter), but the problem is that we don’t quite know how to take Greek theatre. The tragedies don’t move us to tears, although we respect their grandeur, and the comedies rarely make us laugh. How much stranger, then, are plays that don’t fit into any comfortable genre, like *Helen*.

Written in 412 BC, three years after Euripides’ wrote *The Trojan Women*, and just after Athens had engaged in yet another disastrous military adventure in its 27-year-long war with Sparta that would ultimately destroy Athenian democracy, *Helen* is neither comedy nor tragedy. It’s a romance, having something in common with Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*; it’s a strident melodrama on the futile hideousness of war; it’s a problem play that’s rarely performed.

In Euripides’ alternate version of legend, Paris never kidnapped Helen and took her off to Troy. Instead, he took her double, a bimbo fashioned by jealous goddesses to fool the Greeks, while the real Helen has been stranded on a remote island since the war began. “The war machine married the dream machine, and the Trojan War was made,” observes Helen. It’s a little like going to war on the pretext of WMDs that are not real. Can you imagine that?

The play is also a musical, and one of its welcome pleasures is the easy way characters break into song, at just the right moments. They sing adaptations of familiar songs – which once again, make the old seem new – and new songs, with lyrics by Salamone and music by David O, who is something of a Los Angeles musical treasure.

The evening begins with a slave, singing a spiritual and pushing a movie projector onstage. The slave's name is Hattie, a reference to Hattie McDaniel, and as played by Carlease Burke she dons the racial stereotype when she has to. Burke is formidable, and delivers some of the evening's funniest lines with flair and grace. Her role is also playwright Salamone's boldest stroke, because the other problem with Greek plays is that it's hard to root for characters that are mythic, after all. Hattie begins singing a spiritual, and ends with her freedom – freedom from slavery, yes, and also freedom from the racial and ethnic stereotyping that's the false ground for Hollywood's formulas and American military intervention. It's where the effortless multicultural casting pays off in an unexpected way, that's both entertaining and uplifting.

As Helen, Rachel Sorsa commands the stage, attended by a chorus, a trio of women who embody Hollywood-movie tropes and also the roles she has been forced to portray: temptress, leader, icon. Helen is statuesque and accomplished, a beauty in a golden dress, worn down by uncertainty and time. She will forever be haunted by the difference between her image – an arrogant princess who was happy to start a terrible war, and her reality, stranded on the island. “Nobody ever got me right,” she says, in a reference both to Hollywood's ways of formulizing characters, and the way Homer told her story. Later, she sings at center stage, before the tears overcome her with grief at the loss of her land, her husband, her name and her youthful beauty: “All dead, for a phantom.”

Rivera's direction is acute and disarmingly simple. He cut his teeth in shoebox theatres, where he learned to position actors along the diagonals; here, even on a large canvas, he manages to maintain a personal intimacy without sacrificing the grandeur of his subject. He's helped by designer John H. Brinkley's simple set of columns which enclose the otherwise too-open space, and R. Christopher Stokes' lighting, which focuses our attention naturally, almost imperceptibly, and also provides a few necessary visual effects.

Salamone is surpassingly comfortable with the material. Menelaos recognizes Helen by watching her first screen test (the movie projector rolls out again). Coquettishly, the playwright has her reading for the part of Helena in the first scene of *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Nor is Salamone afraid of some in-jokes and Greek humor. Menelaos at first mistakes Helen for her mother – she's much older than the last time he saw her. After her barbed tongue convinces him she's really his long-lost wife, he faces off against her. “It could be worse,” he says, “you could be *my* mother.” “That's *funny*? An Oedipus joke?” she retorts.

The cast is uniformly excellent. Maxwell Caulfield's Menelaos is a scrappy warrior with just enough self-awareness to hide at the right moments, but not enough to recognize he's as lunk-headed as Helen says he is. Melody Butiu, Arnése DeLay and Jayme Lake are the talented and entertaining chorus. Natsuko Ohama plays the dictator's sister and, with a great sense of humor, a put-upon deus ex machina. Christopher Rivas steals his scene as a legless war vet, and Robert Almodovar ably plays an old soldier who knew Helen and Menelaos decades before, and who now puts together the Trojan War's deceptive pretext.

This production of *Helen* shows, once again, that the best, most varied, and riskiest theatre in America is taking place in Los Angeles these days. Another welcome pleasure.

Euripides' Helen at Los Angeles' J. Paul Getty Villa, through September 29. Information [here](#).

You may also be interested in: [How Theatre Invented Democracy](#)

[Adam Leipzig](#) will be speaking at the [Commonwealth Club in San Francisco on October 9](#).

Image: Front left to right – Rachel Sorsa (Helen), Robert Almodovar (Old Soldier), Back – Maxwell Caulfield (Menelaos), © 2012 J. Paul Getty Trust, Photo by: Craig Schwartz

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