

Newsday

THEATER REVIEW

A passionate, topical Troy story

BY GORDON COX

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April 5, 2004

A baby is murdered midway through Euripides' "Trojan Women." It's a shockingly brutal moment, but it can be tough to summon the actual horror of it onstage, where, more often than not, an infant is represented by an obviously fake swaddled doll. It's likely that the only surefire way to make the event resonate would be to show us a real baby.

Leave it to the Classical Theater of Harlem to be committed enough to the gut-punch of Greek drama to do just that. In its adaptation of "Trojan Women," which opened Friday night, the adorable little girl Rain Jack, who doesn't look more than 6 months old, plays the doomed son Astyanax. Onstage even during the somber pre-show tableau, the serene tyke remains present throughout the proceedings, until soldiers rip him from the arms of his mother Andromache (Robyne Landiss Walker) and carry him off to his doom.

Before that, the beaten, broken women of Troy - awaiting enslavement to the victorious Greeks - scuttle around the stage's chain-link enclosure, desperately trying to protect the child with a barricade of their own bodies. It's genuinely awful, as it should be, and it works because for the actresses, the stakes are as real as the baby.

This "Trojan Women," adapted and directed by Alfred Preisser, runs only about 70 minutes, and it's a good thing, too. With its war zone set (by Troy Hourie) behind a permanent curtain of fencing, plus the convincingly soiled finery provided by costume designer Kimberly Glennon, the production teeters on the verge of being relentlessly grim. This is especially true during the opening sequence, which introduces us to the women by incorporating testimonies from survivors of more recent conflicts in Somalia, Sierra Leone and Iraq. It doesn't take long for the litany of atrocities to become numbing and unsurprising.

Preisser, though, is smart enough to understand the value of juxtaposition, and he soon breaks the mood with the appearance of the comically mealy-mouthed Talthybius, a diplomat played with honesty and smooth humor by Ron Simons. The character proves a useful tool for modulating the tone and pace of the show, managing to right it nearly every time it threatens to tip over into arty finger-wagging.

The ensemble enacts the play's violence with the gripping physical fearlessness that marks most of the theater's productions. Walker reaches affecting depths of emotion without any actorly fuss, and as the mad precognitive Cassandra, Bianca LaVerne Jones makes for a ferocious stage presence (even if her rage begins to feel undifferentiated). Lizan Mitchell plays the fallen queen Hecuba with firm dignity and controlled venom.

Photos



["Trojan Women"](#) (Photo by Enid Farber)

The production portrays Helen, the possessor of the face that launched a thousand ships, as a scheming temptress whose intelligence equals her beauty. With her high-class British accent, Zainab Jah radiates a seductive confidence even as Menelaus, played by the strong and volatile Ty Jones, drags her around - quite convincingly - by the neck.

Preisser and his cast boldly enhance the contemporary echoes sounded by the script, but never allow them to drown out the original. "Trojan Women" makes for a tough, topical evening, and the Classical Theater of Harlem is one of the few troupes in New York with the passion to pull it off.

TROJAN WOMEN. By Euripides, adapted and directed by Alfred Preisser. Classical Theater of Harlem at the HSA Theater, 645 St. Nicholas Ave. near 141st Street. Seen Friday.

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