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THEATER REVIEW | 'TROIJAN WOMEN'

After the War, Before the Slavery, Steeping in Civilization's Tatters

By MARGO JEFFERSON



When we talk about making the classics relevant, we make it sound like an uphill struggle. Some plays, however grand, do feel remote, but "The Trojan Women" is not one of them. Euripides' women were survivors of a wrecked civilization, prisoners of war about to be carried into slavery. In the Classical Theater of Harlem's dynamic and harrowing production, the survivors are behind the barbed wire fence of a refugee camp. Some sit and stare, some pace, some moan and chatter to themselves. Their gowns, once fine, are tattered. As searchlights scan the rubble, we hear gunshots, sirens, bird cries and

splashing water.

A skinny, wild-haired girl in rags clings to the fence, holding a doll. She is 10 years old. "I used to love this place/I would have liked to grow up here," she says, staring out at us bitterly.

*But we are a defeated people now
And this is the first day of our slavery
So that's the life I get now.*

Everyone tells the girl, Asyntanax, that the war was Helen's fault. She is too young to remember: "Actually I was just born on the day this started/Actually I got old too soon."

Athens had been at war with Sparta for 16 years when Euripides' play was first performed. People had endured famine and plague; the Athenian army had slaughtered Greek neighbors who wanted to remain neutral. Alfred Preisser's adaptation holds fast to these ancient cruelties, while being entirely of our time. The Trojan War (centuries before the war with Sparta) is the frame,

but the script includes the testimony of women who have survived today's wars in Sierra Leone, Somalia and Iraq. It is devastating.

Here Talthybius (Ron Simons), the Greek herald who informs the women of their fate, is a diplomat in a trim suit and snappy red sweater. How Mr. Simons gets those unctuous pieties ("truly in war there are no winners"), those practiced euphemisms, that nervous dislike of squalor and despair. Are they to be slaves? the women ask.

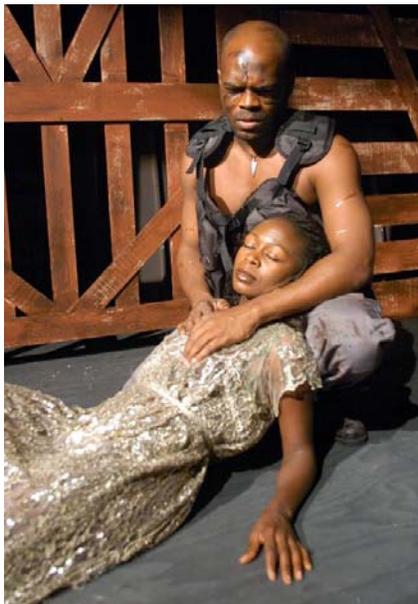
"Let's say wives," he answers. They should think of their masters as guardians.

The deeds of war are more explicit in these modern-day accounts. Houses are torched. Villagers are beaten and shot. Women are raped again and again. One woman, in a tattered red gown, stares into space, describing how soldiers hacked off first an arm, then a hand. She wears two black gloves: one long, one short.

What can gods mean to a defeated people? the women ask themselves. Have their gods forsaken them? Do their gods exist? Does justice exist? Trojans fought brutally, too: are they innocent because they lost and are victims now?

Mr. Preisser's direction is visceral yet taut. The chorus chants, sings and speaks, never losing its rhythmic pulse. The women break into furious dance, then break apart, each lost in her own well of rage and sorrow.

Individual voices come through like power surges. Lizan Mitchell is a grand Hecuba, the queen who moves from self-absorbed grief to moral awareness; Cassandra (Bianca La Verne) shrieks and tears at her body, glorying in the vengeance that will fall on the House of Atreus.



Helen (a silken-voiced Zainab Jah) sits apart, outside and above the camp, on a round wooden structure. She is a slave now, but she glows and delicately preens, a woven gold robe over her lavender gown. The women of Troy hurl abuse at her. In reply she calls them "trophies, spoils, army whores," adding, "you get to live as I've been living." Female piety demands that they blame her for the war. She parries with: "The men who write history will say this was all the work of a single woman. But I think you all know those men have been known to lie."

As the Trojan women think back, trying to reclaim the truth of their lives before the war, they are forced to admit that even in their own country, brutality was normal; some people were treated then as these prisoners are treated now. How could they not see this, they ask. And as they disappear into the darkness, we ask ourselves the same question.

TROJAN WOMEN

By Euripides; adapted and directed by Alfred Preisser; sets by Troy Hourie; costumes by Kimberly Glennon; lighting by Aaron Black; sound by Matt Krauss; choreographer, Tracy Jack; musical director, Kelvyn Bell; stage manager, Joan Cappello. Presented by the Classical Theater of Harlem, Christopher McElroen, co-founder and executive director; Mr. Preisser, co-founder and artistic director. At the Harlem School of the Arts, 645 St. Nicholas Avenue, near 141st Street, Hamilton Heights.

WITH: Rain Jack (Asyntanax), Zainab Jah (Helen), Ty Jones (Menelaus), Bianca La Verne (Cassandra), Lizan Mitchell (Hecuba) and Ron Simons (Talthybius).