

The Persians: Performing Aeschylus' Tragedy Today

LA Islam Arts Initiative



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By **Victoria Looseleaf**

There's a reason that Aeschylus' 472 B.C. drama "Persians" is rarely performed. "It's nearly impossible to do," says Anne Bogart, co-founder and director of New York-based SITI Company. But Bogart was up for the challenge. Her troupe has brought it to life in a new play at the Getty Villa's amphitheater, running through September 27. "One of the reasons it is important is because it's [one of the] the first plays ever written," she says. "You're at the moment when tragedy is invented in the Western world."

For those who think that a centuries-old play has little or no relevance in the modern era, think again. Just one look at headlines populating Twitter and Facebook reveals that dramatic tragedy is rampant in today's world, especially in the Middle East, where ISIS terrorizes Iraq and Syria and conflict continues between the Palestine and Israel. This ancient Greek drama resonates now more than ever, portraying the captivating aftermath of warfare.



Gian-Murray Gianino as Xerxes (center) in "Persians" by Aeschylus at the Getty Villa. | © 2014 Craig Schwartz.

Performed in a translation by Aaron Poochigian, "Persians" is an emotional story of war, victory, and the grievous loss felt by an imagined Persian court. The story, Bogart points out, "is something we face every day."

The sole surviving Greek tragedy about a historical event (and the only remaining portion of a trilogy that snagged first prize in Athens' City Dionysia festival), the play recounts the Persians' defeat by the Greeks in 480 B.C. in the naval battle at Salamis. King Xerxes, determined to avenge his father's defeat, instead brings ruin to the Persians, with Aeschylus not only glorifying the Athenian victors, but also humanizing the defeated Persians. In the process, the playwright is able to emphasize the universal impact of war on family and community.

"Persians" was last performed in Los Angeles in 1993, in a poorly received Peter Sellars' mounting that was a response to the Gulf War. With 37 percent of this country's 1 to 2 million Iranian-American and Persian-identifying populations living in California, mostly in L.A. and Orange Counties, the play has a particular interest.

Alireza Ardekani, executive director of Farhang Foundation, an organization celebrating Iranian art and culture in Southern California, points out that as a community, modern Persian and Iranian Americans are sensitive to how their culture or history is portrayed.

"Sometimes it is a negative vision in the West of what Iranians represent -- what being Iranian or Persian is," Ardekani says. "I think there is that sensitivity. Some people might think this play is something it might not be. Until you see the play, it is not a negative portrayal; it's a sympathetic portrayal. It is about the losing of the war, but to me it was a positive view to get a perspective of what the Persians were experiencing or what the playwright thought they were experiencing."

Ardekani says he was fascinated by the play. "It's basically a fictional depiction of what Aeschylus thought was happening. He did it in a sympathetic manner, and writing about your enemy in a sympathetic way isn't easy."



Ellen Lauren as Queen Atossa in "Persians" by Aeschylus at the Getty Villa. | © 2014 Craig Schwartz.

Ardekani said he was impressed with the production, adding that what he took away from the play was the notion that "you never know what's happening on the other side." He continues: "We can relate to the play and learn from the play, how we can judge other cultures or countries, but you never know what their view is back to us. The play talks about being open-minded and trying to visualize what the other side is thinking and what their point of view is, which is very difficult to do sometimes."

But why "Persians" and why now?

The Getty
Visions of Hostile Gods

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Bogart says SITI Company, which she founded in 1992 with Tadashi Suzuki to help redefine and revitalize contemporary theater in the United States, is a perfect fit with Aeschylus' masterpiece. The troupe is also no stranger to the Getty Villa, having mounted re-visions of works that include "Antigone," "The Trojan Women," and "The Bacchae" over the last five years.

Explains Bogart: "We were drawn to "Persians" for its embodiment of a Greek society imagining the sorrow of their recently defeated enemy -- the Persians -- but we were also interested in discovering what Chorus was and how it functioned -- that the protagonist of the play may be the Chorus."

The play is set in Persia, near modern-day Iran, at the palace of the kingdom's ruler Xerxes, played by Gian-Murray Gianino. The Queen Mother Atossa (Ellen Lauren) awaits word with the Chorus in the tomb of her dead husband, King Darius (Stephen Duff Webber), Xerxes's father. A messenger arrives, reporting the battle's ghastly details, also declaring Xerxes has escaped alive. Atossa then summons the ghost of Darius, while Xerxes returns in defeat to mourn with the others. Some say that this is one of the first recorded instances of a dream-sequence in a play.



Ellen Lauren as Queen Attossa (center) and the Chorus in "Persians" by Aeschylus at the Getty Villa. | © 2014 Craig Schwartz.

For Lauren, a co-artistic director of SITI, who performed the role of Hecuba in the 2011 production of "The Trojan Women," the play proved both confounding and revelatory.

"I think like any actor," says Lauren, who also teaches at Juilliard and has been commuting to New York on Mondays during the run of the play, "that if they had a brain in their heads they should be confounded by the "Persians." Because to find your performance in the piece is a little bit of a detective hunt.

"It is an extraordinary document," adds Lauren in a mellifluous, meant-for-the-stage voice. "There is no question, but to read it and to see how you're going to bring a world on the stage to life, to find out the logic of the world. What do they look like, how do they move, what do they sound like? Is it expressive, realistic, poetical, mystical? This piece is all of these things, or can contain all of them. I'm not smart enough to know it as a scholar, but as an actor who has to embody it, these Greek plays will take anything you throw at them.

"That," she states emphatically, "is unnerving."

Lauren added that since she's been "inside" the language, it seems human, but when initially reading it, the work seemed more like an oratorio or an opera. "Any time you hear a list of names, you don't have to understand what these names mean. They can be strange names that Aeschylus has written, but today they become images of real people."



Will Bond as the Messenger in "Persians" by Aeschylus
at the Getty Villa. | © 2014 Craig Schwartz.

In the performance, a particularly moving moment occurs when a Persian messenger names the soldiers and generals who have died on the battle field. Lauren said that for the New York based SITI Company, listing the names of the fallen and performing "Persians" on September 11, was very moving. Like Aeschylus' list of the dead, certain September 11 memorial ceremonies have also included readings of the names of those who perished. "I think the audience was aware of it, too. I found that I was trying to go after a bigger, broader image of who I was playing in terms of being a queen, in terms of my responsibility of the narrative of the piece. I just kept coming back to this image as a mother, the facilitator, with the queen running through it like a thread."

It is, after all, the queen, Lauren notes, who is the only one taking action to further the narrative line. Playing the role of the Chorus leader also allows the story to move forward until Xerxes, her son, finally enters.

"It's a fascinating road map that Aeschylus has written. You also get the sense that it is one of the first plays, because you get echoes of all the centuries of theater that is to come and how he's experimenting. When you put your ear to it and listen, it is an extraordinary piece, but very difficult.



"It also feels as if there's nothing in there for any of us -- actors or audience -- in terms of an emotional line," Lauren continues. "But there is, and when the actor makes it personal, it's so strong and such a complex document dealing with victory and defeat and the balance he was able to walk.

The actor cites "Persians" as "a piece of genius -- something that had never been tried before. You get the sense that this was the first playwright creating characters out of Chorus, which is exciting and right up my alley. This is the kind of thing I lived for and trained for, and the opportunity to do it now keeps me going."

Bogart, who has written five books and also heads the MFA directing program at Columbia University, has never acted, giving her a kind of hands-off directorial approach.



Anne Bogart, Co-Artistic Director of SITI Company and Director of "Persians" by Aeschylus at the Getty Villa. | © 2014 Craig Schwartz.

"You take an actor -- either playing the queen, the messenger or Darius or Xerxes -- any of these characters -- and they are miserable. [Basically] I say, 'Go! Do something,' because the onus is on the actor to deal with that kind of emotionality, since they know I won't tell them how to do anything. I tell them what I know and what I don't know. Here are the parameters, now try to make it work."

Bogart has read the scholars on the play and relates that the play was essentially about entrances.

"What would it feel like if the audience were used to seeing a Chorus and then an individual emerged from the Chorus? It was about the spectacle of the queen arriving, probably with a huge entourage and lifted high, maybe with a horse, who knows," says Bogart.

"But we don't have horses or huge entourages, so we're using the tools we have to make it spectacular. The queen has a 50-foot train of fabric following her," notes the director, who admits to being a huge Christo fan.



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Bogart, an Obie award-winner whose co-production, "A Rite," with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, lands at CAP UCLA next March, has also directed opera and most recently, "Steel Hammer." Presented at Actors Theatre of Louisville, the play about John Henry features texts by four African-Americans and music and lyrics by Bang On A Can's Julia Wolfe.

Bogart is adamant in her belief that we are now in a golden age of theater.

"I think that because so much life is now mediated through TV and the Internet, and because so much time is spent in a virtual space, theater's become more relevant. The force of being present with live actors is unusual. It's radical to be together with people. Theater is in a fantastic moment now.

"And," adds Bogart, "the audiences at the Getty come ready for a special experience. They will sit down 30 minutes before the show starts to get their seats. They're very engaged. It's not an easy play; it's demanding. It's a gym for the soul. You go for a workout -- emotional and physical."

"Persians," *Getty Villa's Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater, 17985 E. Pacific Coast Hwy, Pacific Palisades 90272. Thurs-Sat., 8 p.m.; through September 27. (310) 440-7300, \$40-\$45.*

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Top Image: SITI Company cast in "Persians" by Aeschylus at the Getty Villa. | © 2014 Craig Schwartz.

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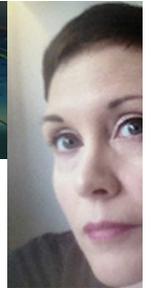
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