

'Persians': Theater Review

12:36 PM PDT 9/14/2014 by Myron Meisel

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Craig Schwartz

The Bottom Line

A modern production that taps the wellspring of theatrical drama

Venue

The Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater at the Getty Villa, Malibu (runs through Sept. 27)

Cast

Ellen Lauren, Leon Ingulsrud, Stephen Duff Webber, Gian-Murray Gianino, Akiko Aizawa, J. Ed Araiza, Eric Berryman, Will Bond, Emily Spaulding

Playwright

Aeschylus, translated by Aaron Poochigian

Director

Anne Bogart

Aeschylus' "Persians" gets a simultaneously avant-garde and classical treatment at the Getty Villa in Malibu

Essentially the ancient-world equivalent of a story torn from the headlines, *Persians* recounts how overwhelmingly outnumbered Greek ships defeated the invading fleet of Xerxes' navy at the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.E., an event fresh in the minds of the Athenian audiences at the festival of Dionysos a scant eight years later.

Though it remains the earliest play whose text survives, doubtless because it won first prize for an already fiftyish **Aeschylus**, its strategy remains innovative and daring, for it narrates the saga exclusively from the suffering viewpoint of the defeated Persians. In the millenia since, their empire has never again threatened Europe, unless one considers now to be such a time.

This victory made the flourishing of Western Civilization possible, yet this author, who may well have been present (as he certainly was at Marathon two years earlier), startlingly commemorates the event entirely as a demonstration of profound empathy, devoid of chest-thumping congratulation or any hagiography of heroes. To this day, patriotic identity is rarely expressed in such tolerant terms.

I don't agree with those commentators who routinely claim that Aeschylus avoids triumphalism; there is plenty of glorification of Greek martial virtues. Certainly from an historical perspective, Aeschylus exaggerates the impact of the loss on Persian civilization, which was not so calamitous as to cause its dissolution. Significantly, at both the start and the finale, these vanquished Persians are heard specifically speaking in the euphonious cadences of the original's Greek, which sounds both weightier and more graceful than the balance of the play in English.

Nevertheless, *Persians* sets an example of sober acknowledgement of the consequences of even an essential war, so

the challenge for a contemporary production rests less in finding relevance than in securing the necessary tone: on the one hand, a plausible sense of anachronistic ritual formality, and on the other, a palpable connection with our modern sensibilities.

After a decade of annual September mountings of classical Greek and Roman tragedies and comedies in its al fresco amphitheater across from its signature façade (each equally authentic and kitschy), the Getty Villa has invited director **Anne Bogart** and her New York-based SITI Company to return after their successful presentation of *Trojan Women* (after Euripides) several years ago.

SITI exhibits a genuine knack for melding the ancient with the avant-garde, ceremonial solemnity with abstract movement. Bogart shrewdly deploys the unique space, particularly in the stately entrance of the grief-stricken Queen of Persia (**Ellen Lauren**), trailing a bright gold train stretching literally Villa-length, at the end of which is the weighty burden of a huge fallen bust. That indelible image overshadows all the subsequent garment-renting lamentations as bad news from the front is Homerically intoned by the bereft Messenger (**Will Bond**), in the most electrifying (and action-packed) speech of the evening.

Indeed, while the doggedly conscientious new translation by **Aaron Poochigian** strives to balance the musical incantation and rhythmic meters of the original with blank verse rhetorically accessible to our own ears, it lacks the punch and flourish manifested in last year's Aeschylus production of *Prometheus Bound*.

Perhaps inevitably for all the profound philosophy on display, a fair amount of the sung or spoken declamation dips toward stentorian slogging, despite the unimpeachably committed ensemble, the gloriously imaginative costumes (**Nephelie Andonyadis**), stimulating music (**Victor Zupanc**) and resourceful outdoor sound design of **Darron L West**.

Taken as a whole, this provides exemplary exposure to an indispensable work of dramatic literature, though for sheer excitement it remains impossible to beat the epic prose account of **Herodotus** in his *The Persian Wars*, which simultaneously invented the practice of history and the art of historical fiction.

Created and Performed by SITI Company
Director: Anne Bogart
Costume designer: Nephelle Andonyadis
Sound designer: Darron L West
Music & choral consultant: Victor Zupanc