



REPORTING ON MUSIC AND THE LIVELY

ARTS.....

MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 8, 2014

The Persians of Aeschylus Premieres at Getty Villa

Review by Rodney Punt

Despite the attempts of sane minds to stem the destructiveness of war, its eons-long sway, arising from human greed or grievance, seems to be eternal.

The oldest surviving play in western civilization, Aeschylus' *The Persians*, clocking in at just shy of 2,500 years, has been trotted out each recent decade as a cautionary tale against hubris whenever the USA goes to war. It relates the disastrous campaign by the superior forces of Persia against the seemingly outnumbered Greeks in the naval battle of Salamis, where the Persian armada was routed at great loss of life.



Gian-Murray Gianino as Xerxes

Aeschylus, who had participated as a combatant in the wars he wrote about, was both generous and shrewd when he set his version of the story from the perspective of the defeated Persians, not the triumphant Greeks. Generous in that the grief and humiliation of an enemy was humanized; shrewd in that references in the play by Persians to Greek battle prowess come across as the grudging admiration of a foe, not the jingoistic bragging of a victor.

(The Greek city-states, by the way, were by no means all on speaking terms with each other; many were in fact allied with Persia.)

In the 1993 aftermath of the first Gulf War, Peter Sellars mounted a blaring, glaring, and unsparing production of the play for Edinburgh and Los Angeles (the latter at the Mark Taper Forum), where the shade of dead King Darius screamed his regrets over a loudspeaker. Later stagings in the style of 24-hour news-cycles shook up Edinburgh and New York after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. This month, as the American response to the rise of ISIS draws our country into another campaign in Iraq to bomb fanatics into obedience, the Getty Villa in California's peaceful Pacific Palisades, hosts the New York-based SITI Company for the latest version of *The Persians*.

Refreshingly retro under company co-artistic director Anne Bogart's direction at its premiere last Wednesday, its stylized choreography, elegiac tone, and professional elocution emphasized reflection over gimmick, pathos over bombast, and precision over pretension. Forgoing the attention grabbing but ultimately ephemeral stage effects of recent outings, this one left an afterglow of emotive substance to ponder.

It wasn't perfect, but it was mighty good. The story unfolds more as an ensemble piece than as individual tours de force, though there were some of the latter. Principal players emerge from within the Chorus and then blend back into the ensemble when their moment is over.

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The company as the Chorus

With nine transparent orange curtains draped as backdrop between the columns of the Villa's northwest façade, the actors emerged one by one from its entrance door and assumed sculpted positions, sometimes as if they were statues speaking. The highly disciplined SITI Company's declamatory speech (in Aaron Poochigian's skillful new translation of the play)

combined with dance and music to evoke the feel of ancient ritualistic theater as it delivered its timely message.

The stage area was the tiled exterior floor space between the Villa's wall and the theater's semi-circular seating. Bogart choreographed her nine actors in geometric dances -- sometimes individualized, often in unison imitation -- to achieve drama and action around and within the dialogue. The quirky movements recalled those associated with primitive Asian peoples who over the millennia populated vast areas from Asia Minor eastward all the way to North America.

The Chorus of Persian Elders initially attempts to calm Queen Attossa of Persia's apprehensions of disaster, and throughout the play comments on the eventual disaster's significance. ("The Greeks serve no king.") The Queen fears for her son, Xerxes, who has led the Persians on the campaign against the Greeks that only the death of her late husband, King Darius, had prevented from his leading.

A threadbare Persian messenger (the willowy, bare-chested Will Bond, tied to an oar for an impossibly long interval) is the first to report the news to the Persian court. Returning General Xerxes (an emotionally wounded, nuanced Gian-Murray Gianino) then arrives in brocaded tatters and chronicles to his mother the armada's disastrous defeat by the wily Greeks. ("Athens has killed our sons.") Having lost his initial encounter, the rash Xerxes ("popped up with pride," according to his mother, and as history suggests trying to outdo his father) had doubled down his forces in an attempt to gain victory, but only found further defeat and the near destruction of all his charges.



Will Bond (Messenger) & Ellen Lauren (Queen)

The Queen (in a powerful performance of human distress by Ellen Lauren) wails in her grief at the news ("So much for the odds"), but engages in damage control at court for fear that Xerxes could lose standing in the empire. ("The people will be free to speak what they want.") She is hardly consoled by further woeful regrets of her ghostly late husband, Darius (a sepulchral Stephen Duff Webber), who curses his reckless son and laments the destruction of all he had built during his lifetime.

The Persians is not so much drama – there is no real confrontation or conflict – as an extended ode of lamentation. In its unfolding in this production, the burden of forward momentum fell on the Chorus, whose songs and dances (the latter sometimes almost painterly abstractions) energetically interpret the sad revelations. Their sweep was not always in perfect sync with details of the narrative, but that is only to quibble with what was throughout always an engaging larger picture.

In that regard, the costumes of Nephelie Andonyadis (modern men's suits with the ladies in floor length dresses) created a feel of kindred time zones between the ancient world and today. An arresting flourish was the long gold train behind the Queen's dress, which configured later as an encircling corral of protection. Darron L. West's sound-design of percussive noises, rattles, and bells reinforced the

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Ring and Chorus around Queen Attossa

action with punch and a feel of timeless profundity. Composer Victor Zupanc's minor-mode songs were less successful, seeming a tad too comfy Elizabethan England for a tragedy set in an exotic ancient Persia.

Xerxes couldn't have known it then, but his hubristic rush to war at Salamis may just have saved what we refer to today as western civilization. Now it's our turn to think

twice before we act in wars heading the other way.

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Incidental grouse: While the seating duration on the nicely cushioned cement bleachers was no Greek marathon, it was uncomfortable without a backrest for an intermission-challenged 90-minutes.

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Photo credits:

1. Gian-Murray Gianino as Xerxes (center) in "Persians" by Aeschylus at the Getty Villa. © 2014 Craig Schwartz.
2. The Chorus in "Persians" by Aeschylus at the Getty Villa. © 2014 Craig Schwartz.
3. Will Bond as the Messenger in "Persians" by Aeschylus at the Getty Villa. © 2014 Craig Schwartz.
4. SITI Company cast in "Persians" by Aeschylus at the Getty Villa. © 2014 Craig Schwartz.

Review of Premiere on Wednesday, September 3, 2014, Getty Villa, Pacifica Palisades, California

Rodney Punt can be contacted at Rodney@ArtsPacifica.net

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2 COMMENTS:

[Anna Naruta-Moya](#) said...

"Refreshingly retro" -- perfect!

[SEPTEMBER 10, 2014 AT 9:00 AM](#)



[Rodney Punt](#) said...

Thanks, Anna N-M. I like to think that on occasion I too can be refreshingly retro. Or at least retro. Or at least refreshing.

[SEPTEMBER 10, 2014 AT 9:27 AM](#)

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