

Review 'Persians' an uneven but accessible account of ancient defeat



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New York's SITI Company performs "Persians" by Aeschylus in the Getty Villa's outdoor theater. (Craig Schwartz)

I magine a play by a contemporary American playwright examining the war in Afghanistan from the point of view of Taliban leaders grieving their losses.

No luck?

This superhuman leap of sympathetic imagination is what Aeschylus achieved in his 472 BC drama "Persians," which is this year's outdoor production at the Getty Villa.

What makes Aeschylus' achievement even more remarkable is that he fought against the invading Persians in the Battle of Marathon and was a witness to (if not a participant in) the Battle of Salamis, which marks a crucial turning point in the play. This is where the Greeks defeated the Persian armada, and the young King Xerxes, determined to avenge his father's defeat, instead brings ruin to the great Persian military machine.

Director Anne Bogart and her New York-based SITI Company return to the Getty to stage this rarely revived work, in a translation by Aaron Poochigian that cuts a decent enough compromise between archaic and accessible. The elevated tone of the original should be maintained, but the play's wisdom mustn't be beyond reach.

Aeschylus' tragedy, while focused on the vanquished, is really directed to future vanquishers. And indeed every generation can learn from the playwright's cautionary tale of imperial overreach, though first-timers to Aeschylus' play might prefer a more straightforward mounting of "Persians" than Bogart and her ensemble provide.

The Getty staging, to its credit, has a concentrated fluidity that held my attention. This is more than I can say for the 2003 National Actors Theatre production directed by Ethan McSweeney at Pace University's Michael Schimmel Center for the Arts in New York, the only other time I've seen the play performed.

Still, I left with unanswered questions about some of Bogart's directorial choices concerning characterizations, acting styles, treatment of the chorus and dramatic tone.

These were questions, I hasten to add, that I wanted to pursue with others after the play was over — an indication of some degree of theatrical success with a work that even the most fearless directors might consider hubristic to take on.

"Persians" is a tough nut to crack. The play, referred to in a reputable classical drama handbook as "perhaps the least dramatic of all Greek tragedies," is broken into distinctive (some might say disjunctive) movements, in which pageantry of language often substitutes for action.

At the start, the chorus of Persian elders — played by both sexes and a variety of ages here — tries unsuccessfully to suppress forebodings about the fate of Xerxes' army. The Queen, Xerxes' mother — powerfully played by Ellen Lauren, the Hecuba in Bogart's 2011 Getty production of "The Trojan Women (After Euripides)" — appears before them to share a dream that has riled her with similar fears.

A messenger (the excellent Will Bond) arrives to reveal that these worries have been horrifically realized. The Queen, agonizing over the news, raises the ghost of her dead husband, King Dareius (Stephen Duff Webber), who blames the reckless youth of their son Xerxes and forecasts further doom. Finally, Xerxes (Gian-Murray Gianino) arrives in tattered clothes, a humiliated leader who entreats his subjects to join him in lamentation for all that has been destroyed.

In Bogart's production, actors emerge from the chorus to portray the tragedy's main figures, returning to the fold when their scene is complete. The chorus moves in a stylized fashion that is sometimes hypnotic (as when the actors sway to the sound of water lapping against the shore), sometimes baffling (as when a performer assumes a quasi-yoga position).

When tension builds, the sound of what I feared might be house music but turned out to be a tone of escalating alarm is heard, an admittedly odd choice in Darron L. West's otherwise impeccable sound design.

The chorus may be the most important "character" in the play. It is through the reaction of this collective body that we experience the hope of victory, the dread of defeat and finally the realization of a divine law that those tempted to transgress the limits of what is humanly permissible will be punished.

Bogart's handling of the chorus wasn't always clear to me. When hearing news of the great calamity, the performers give way to melodramatic gesturing. At other points they seem like detached witnesses of an experimental theater piece.

In general, the production, performed in modern dress with classical touches on a set designed and lighted by Brian H. Scott with effective minimalism, struggled to find a balance between representational and nonrepresentational acting.

Lauren's Queen can erupt with powerful emotion not unlike what you'd find in a realistic portrayal, while Webber's Dareius, resembling a stock trader brought back from the dead, is played with an insouciant irony that seems like it was imported from another SITI offering. Gianino's Xerxes affects a posture that tries to suggest both overweening pride and overwhelming shame but ends up appearing indecisive.

More could have been made of the decadent wealth of the Persians. The Queen's farcically long golden train added some satiric bite to Nephelie Andonyadis' costume design, but this gilded age of ours could have used a few more pointed reminders.

Still, I was grateful for the chance to see a vigorous rendition of this landmark play, the only extant Greek tragedy based on a historical event, one that occurred only eight years prior to when the play was first performed. Aeschylus, who understood Aristotle's notion that "poetry is a more philosophical business than history" before Aristotle drew breath, relates to the Persian defeat as though it were a myth — in other words, the source of eternal pattern and religious principle.

There is no triumphalism in "Persians," no extolling of the Greeks, no denigrating of their would-be enslavers. What is clearly delineated is a lesson to Athens on the necessity of restraint in victory.

Also encoded in the work is the knowledge that the delusion that leads men to overstep legitimate boundaries isn't the property of any one nationality. Greed, pride and the lust for revenge will continue to drive those who feel that they are above the law.

Athens will learn this the hard way. "Persians" marks the beginning of a golden age. Roughly 60 years later, a seemingly invincible fleet will set sail with imperial dreams, bringing this glorious period to a crashing end.

'Persians'

Where: Getty Villa's Barbara and Lawrence Fleischman Theater, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Pacific Palisades

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays to Saturdays. Ends Sept. 27.

Tickets: \$40 to \$45

Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

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