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Photo by Craig Schwartz



Persians

Reviewed by **Bob Verini**
SITI Company at the Getty Villa
Through Sept. 27

RECOMMENDED:

Reviewing the 2011 Getty Villa production of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, staged by Anne Bogart with her New York-based SITI Company, I called it "essential viewing for anyone interested in the conversation between timeless texts and modern theatrical practice," expressing my conviction that Bogart and co. had "unearthed the vital, immediate drama within." All of the above applies in equal measure to their current Getty attraction, Aeschylus's *Persians*.

SITI sidesteps all the difficulties inherent in bringing an alien artistic form alive, even as they eschew all the cheesy devices (explicit contemporary references; rock music; vulgar slang!) that vain directors are wont to use in order to wrench a timeless text into the present day. SITI, instead, thoughtfully applies everything they know about acting technique to bring classical personages to life. As simple as that. The resulting work is inspirational, and absolutely, positively not to be missed.

The gods know Aeschylus didn't give a modern producer much to work with in the way of such



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familiar elements as character conflict and evolution, or rising and falling action. More than two millennia ago he took the solo actor out of the chorus for the first time, but it would be generations before a second or third character would be given a chance to lock horns with a protagonist mano a mano. What we get in *Persians*, the earliest surviving Greek tragedy, is a series of set pieces in which a single speaker (a messenger or member of royalty) pops in to talk with, or at, a group of elders, until such time as another speaker supplants him. That's entertainment? Not by modern standards; not to most theatergoers, even serious ones.

Moreover, the action, such as it is, is no more substantial than a series of Tweets. King Xerxes and his mighty Persian Empire have invaded Greece, and everyone in his capital of Susa is on tenterhooks to hear about the victory. Oops. A messenger, then the ghost of the king's father, then Xerxes himself come by to explain how Athens managed to sink a much more substantial fleet in the Battle of Salamis, and then kill on shore every Persian who escaped drowning. This report of total debacle – complete with dozens of slaughtered warriors evoked by name – would have been riveting to a 472 B.C. audience for whom Salamis had occurred less than a decade earlier (*Persians* is also the only surviving Greek text based on an actual event). But we can agree that a 90-minute tale of woe, concerning a people remote if not totally unknown event hardly stacks up as surefire theatrical fare in the present day.

From the opening moments, as the chorus assembles for its first lyric, you know that SITI has gotten it right. One at a time, each performer, clad in a mixture of modern cut and classical black, enters to keep watch over a different part of the (audience) horizon. Each is straining to learn what has transpired, but, as far as we can tell, exhibits no hint of doubt about outcome. They start to sway, ever so carefully, with a hint of arrogance creeping onto their faces, almost as if they'd gotten an advance copy of the happy news from the front lines. Finally they begin to traverse the stage in a spiral, becoming twos and threes, but it's as if their coming together is really a defense mechanism against seeds of worry and doubt that have taken root among the throng. Their movements end in a united chorus, but one whose fear is finally palpable.

What has happened is that in this one silent sequence, the Chorus has behaved as a *single character*, one transitioning from anticipation to pride to apprehension exactly as characters do in more conventional drama. Moreover, the heightened mood tells us that something truly important is at stake. As the ensemble falls into its strophes and antistrophes and final epode, the suspense is almost unbearable.

In all of this, we can pinpoint the secret of SITI's success. The company is so thoughtful, and the artists so skilled, that they are able to find drama changing dynamics in a series of speeches that most others would just take as sheer declamation; or, in a wordless pageant, most would just seize as an opportunity for formal dance. They present the play, in short, as a real moment in time.

Every aspect of this *Persians* is full of meaning, but more importantly full of human dimension. As the messenger (Will Bond) names the deceased warriors along with their famous traits – Matallus, who led his 30,000 warriors on jet-black steeds; Tenagon, bravest of the Bactrians – each member of the company is wounded to the heart, such that you wouldn't be surprised to learn that the SITI actors had chosen images of each man and imprinted them into their brains, so as to make their losses real and shared. When expressive human beings are gathered together in feeling, those emotions can't help but transfer over to an audience, and so it is here for the entirety of the 90 minutes.

Even the translation by Aaron Poochigian makes a huge, human difference: We are told that for the first time, an adapter has incorporated a mixture of blank verse, and rhyme or near-rhyme, to approximate the distinctions in Aeschylus's versifying. Whether or not that's the case, there's no question that the variety of diction and syntax (and you absolutely can hear the rhyming ebb and flow in the course of the evening) contributes to a sense of urgent conversation, as opposed to the pompous speechifying one tends to associate with Greek tragedy as conventionally staged.

Certainly there are modern-day associations for the making. The looming sheets of saffron fabric billowing down from the roof to mask the Getty Museum evoke Saddam Hussein's palace at its most exotically ornate. A bearded, grimacing Xerxes (Gian-Murray Gianino) in ridiculous dress uniform could be Uday Hussein to the life, and his self-righteous justification and excuses for his aborted military venture will strike familiar chords in light of America's last 10 years of foreign intervention. For that matter, the painful litany of the dead will remind some of commemorations of Sept. 11, 2001, just as the giant severed head of a Greek warrior statue, dragged in on an endless golden trail of fabric, brought chills less than 48 hours after the tragic news, from the same part of the world, of the fate of journalist Steven Sotloff.

Bogart and her designers (Brian H. Scott for sets and lighting; Nephelle Andonyadis, costumes;

[@StageRaw](http://t.co/RxoUrXdp0D)'s Top Ten #LAThr @LAOpera @WhitefireTheatre @EWPlayers @BostonCourt @SacredFoolsLA @SouthCoastRep about 15 hours ago from Hootsuite

[@StageRaw](http://t.co/X2K4rK4vL2) New Reviews are now up! From La Traviata to Buried Child #LAThr @LAOpera @WhitefireTheatre @BostonCourt about 18 hours ago from Hootsuite

@WIBond @siticompany @gettyvilla The link below should do the trick. <http://t.co/XtX9WJ6ogC> 02:43:47 AM September 16, 2014 from Twitter Web Client in reply to WIBond

<http://t.co/5B4X8fkNaL> "O'Neill's Ghosts" "gnaws at the psyche of Eugene O'Neill" @StageRaw #LAThr @OdysseyTheatre 12:00:41 AM September 15, 2014 from Hootsuite

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Darron L. West, sound; Victor Zupanc, music) are to be commended for arranging stage images and sound portraits which would admit reflection on our own world, but even more so for resisting any temptation to rub our noses in easy modern parallels. But then again, how could they do anything else, in staying so true to the vision of a playwright they clearly see as a colleague and contemporary, albeit 2,700 years away?

SITI Company at the Getty Villa, 17985 Pacific Coast Highway, Malibu; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; through Sept. 27. (310) 444-7300, getty.edu

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