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WEEKEND **Arts** MOVIES
PERFORMANCES

Emotional Clarity in the Murkiness of Endless War

With its litany of betrayals and curses, dead spouses and soon-to-be-dead children, “The Trojan Women” can sometimes feel like an endurance test. Just how

ERIC GRODE

THEATER REVIEW

much keening and garment rending can an audience withstand? Anne Bogart and her ever-inventive SITI Company have dialed back the pathos for the stately “Trojan Women (After Euripides),” opting for emotional clarity over cathartic tumult. Here Hecuba, the fallen queen of Troy, has the perspective to examine her own state: “Should I weep? I can weep. All I have left are my tears.” Only rarely does this emphasis dull the impact of Euripides’ 415 B.C. play, and when the floodgates do finally open up in Jocelyn Clarke’s insightful adaptation, the result is that much more devastating.

Granted, the characters’ wall-to-wall despair is a valid re-

sponse to the events of the drama, which is set the day after the sack of Troy has ended the Greek Army’s 10-year siege of the city. The entire Trojan population is either dead or bound for slavery, and Euripides follows four survivors who are about to be handed out to Greek generals. Hecuba (a masterly Ellen Lauren) attempts to comfort her two surviving daughters, Cassandra (Akiko Aizawa), who has been driven mad by the carnage, and Andromache (the touching Makela Spielman), who clutches her infant son for dear life.

There is a fourth Trojan woman too, a more recent arrival: Helen (Katherine Crockett), whose face launched those thousand warships from Greece to Troy in the first place. From the minute her spurned husband, Menelaus (J. Ed Araiza), once again lays eyes on her, however, it becomes clear that her fate is more promising than that of her

fellow prisoners.

Euripides’ view of seemingly constant war has rarely been anything but timely, a fact that many modernizing directors and translators have exploited. The frequent SITI collaborator Charles L. Mee, who was approached to work on this piece, made these resonances much clearer in his “Trojan Women: A Love Story.” (He would have been in good company had he opted to revisit the material: Euripides originally addressed the subject matter in “Hecuba,” and in it and “Trojan Women” he draws comparisons between the Trojan War and the contemporary Peloponnesian War.)

Mr. Clarke and Ms. Bogart also have their way with the text, but their changes are more structural. Every one of them is justifiable, and most are commendable. The chorus of bereaved women has given way to one eunuch priest (Barney O’Hanlon), and

Odysseus, only discussed in the original, here appears as a shrewd Machiavel (a winning Gian-Murray Gianino).

The biggest change involves the play’s most wrenching plot point. Andromache’s infant poses a threat to the Greeks, as they and the vengeance-minded Trojan women know, and the baby’s death is all but certain. But while Euripides assigned the murder to the Greeks, Mr. Clarke gives the women — stripped of their gods, their husbands, their home, their freedom — the agency to commit one final act.

Not all of the cast is as strong as its material. Ms. Crockett, a principal dancer with the Martha Graham company, makes a stunning first impression as she swans onto the grief-choked stage. But as Helen squares off against Hecuba over who bears responsibility for the 10-year war, the performance fails to grow in depth. Ms. Aizawa’s maddened



RICHARD TERMINE

Ellen Lauren plays Hecuba at BAM’s Harvey Theater.

Trojan Women (After Euripides)

Created and performed by SITI Company; directed by Anne Bogart; adapted by Jocelyn Clarke; music by Christian Fredrickson; lighting by Brian H. Scott; design by James Schuette; costumes by Melissa Tri; stage manager, Emily Hayes; production manager, Megan Caplan; assistant director, Marina McClure. A SITI Company production, presented by the Brooklyn Academy of Music’s Next Wave Festival. At the BAM Harvey Theater, 651 Fulton Street, Fort Greene; (718) 636-4100; bam.org. Through Sunday. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes.

WITH: Brent Werzner (Poseidon), Barney O’Hanlon (Chorus), Ellen Lauren (Hecuba), Leon Ingulsrud (Envoy), Akiko Aizawa (Cassandra), Makela Spielman (Andromache), Katherine Crockett (Helen), J. Ed Araiza (Menelaus) and Gian-Murray Gianino (Odysseus).

Kassandra and Mr. Araiza’s fickle Menelaus also suffer from a lack of modulation.

Luckily, Ms. Lauren navigates the text’s melancholy lulls and harrowing depths with devastating force and even an occasional flash of wit, her regal bearing only gradually giving way to despair. Nuance has never been

what this play is known for; the classicist Richmond Lattimore wrote, “In candor, one can hardly call ‘The Trojan Women’ a good piece of work, but it seems nevertheless to be a great tragedy.” Ms. Bogart, with considerable help from her star and her translator, has helped remedy this imbalance a bit.