

STAGE REVIEW

# A splendid 'Trojan Women'

By Jeffrey Gantz | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 19, 2013

Euripides's "Trojan Women" is often held up as a model of antiwar sentiment. It is that, but it's also a masterwork of human psychology in which the title women, bereft of all hope, confront their Greek captors in the aftermath of the Trojan War. Is life as a slave or a concubine preferable to death? Should you be nice to your new master? Do the gods matter? Commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum and first presented at the Getty Villa in Los Angeles in 2011, SITI Company's 110-minute version looks to pare the drama down to its bare Euripidean essentials. Adapter Jocelyn Clarke has in fact stripped Euripides's text of flesh as well as flash, but he and SITI artistic director Anne Bogart have created a powerful new work, and the production now up on the Paramount Center Mainstage, under the auspices of ArtsEmerson, boasts a signature performance by Ellen Lauren as Queen Hecuba. If it's not exactly Euripides's "Trojan Women," it's still a very good one.

And it goes its own way from the very beginning. Euripides starts us off with an exchange between Poseidon and Athena, the two of them kvetching about the destruction of their shrines and vowing vengeance on the Greeks while barely deigning to notice the humiliated Hecuba groveling in the dirt behind them. Here, Poseidon (Brent Werzner) has the stage to himself. Wearing a sea-blue tunic and pants, he strides slowly, powerfully toward the audience and, holding a golden apple in one hand, tells of the fall of Troy, blaming the war on "the jealousy of men" and "the vanity of gods." Making explicit what Euripides needed only to hint at, he also tells the story of the golden apple, how it was Hecuba's son Paris who gave it to Aphrodite (angering Miss Olympus beauty contest rivals Hera and Athena), and how Aphrodite then made Menelaus's wife Helen leave him and run off to Troy with Paris, thus starting the Trojan War.

Then the women appear: Hecuba, dropping to her knees and falling face down in the big black circle of ashes that occupies center stage; her priestess daughter Cassandra (Akiko Aizawa), wild-haired and wild-eyed; daughter-in-law Andromache (Makela Spielman), Hector's widow, with baby son Astyanax; and Spartan Helen (Katherine Crockett), a tall blonde supermodel. The first three wear white Greek-style dresses whose hems quickly soil; Helen sports a designer model that's somehow dirt resistant. Euripides's chorus of Trojan women is, in a puzzling move, replaced by a eunuch servant (Barney O'Hanlon) who functions as Hecuba's friend but doesn't speak to the enormity of what's happened to the title characters. Greek envoy Talthybius (Leon Ingulsrud), an ambiguous character in the original, is here a big bruiser in black military gear whose bark is worse than his bite.

Euripides wrote "Trojan Women" as a black comedy; the SITI version is more of a tragedy. Aizawa's Cassandra is interpreted as having been driven insane by war rather than by the god who gave her the gift of prophecy. Astyanax,



RICHARD TERMINE

**From left: Ellen Lauren as Queen Hecuba, Gian-Murray Gianino as Odysseus, and Barney O'Hanlon as a servant in "Trojan Women (After Euripides)."**

who in Greek myth is thrown down from the walls of Troy, meets a different fate here; the change is well set up by the script, but his story devolves into melodrama. So do the last 15 minutes of the play, in which Lauren, who has given a superbly tough, controlled performance to this point, indulges in un-Euripidean histrionics.

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But nothing could be funnier than J. Ed Araiza's over-the-top Menelaus, in a tuxedo, looking bewildered as first Crockett's slinky Helen tells him why he shouldn't kill her and then Hecuba tells him why he should. (Does he? Euripides didn't have to say, because his audience already knew, but Clarke hints at the outcome with one beautifully simple original line.) And toward the end, Greek bad boy Odysseus (Gian-Murray Gianino) enters. In the original, he's heard of but not seen; here he gets to speak for himself, and he's a marvel of rationalization and self-justification, both in Clarke's script and in Gianino's performance. Euripides himself could scarcely have done better.

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## TROJAN WOMEN (AFTER EURIPIDES)

Paramount Center Mainstage, 617-824-8400.  
<http://www.artsemerson.org>

**Writers:** Adapted by Jocelyn Clarke from the play by Euripides

**Director:** Anne Bogart

**Other Credits:** Lighting, Brian H Scott, Costumes, Melissa Trn, Original music composed and performed by Christian Frederickson

**Performing company:** SITI Company

**Presenting organizations:** ArtsEmerson

**Date closing:** April 21

**Ticket price:** \$25-\$89

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