



Women's strength evident in Euripides' tragedy

WT project is emotionally riveting and technically sound

by Anna E. Hiller

January is a difficult month for Oberlin students, all of whom, at some point, contemplate the question "Just what is this Winter Term thing all about?" Seniors and first-years alike are sometimes pressed to come up with a satisfactory answer.

Not so, perhaps, for the crew and cast of *Women of Troy*. The Theater and Dance Department's production of Euripides' tragedy, dating from 415 B.C., is a riveting example of what hard work during Winter Term can produce. There is no "slacking" in *Women of Troy*. This performance is an exhaustive study in the physical and psychological processes of mourning and the duties of women during wartime.

The action of the play takes place in Troy, just after the Greeks have built their wooden horse and sacked the city. All the great Trojans - Hector, Priam, Paris - are gone, killed by the victorious Greeks. The only people that remain in Troy are the women, without husbands and fathers, and without a homeland. These women have lost their culture and their identity. There is no city, there are no men who will define them any longer. *Women of Troy* focuses on the women's grief over this titanic loss as a means of exploring the ethics of war. The message that is conveyed is remarkable in its timelessness. College senior Abigail Cotler, assistant director and assistant lighting director, remarks that the play is similar to the situation that exists presently in the former Yugoslavia. The issues of home, national identity and war are still as relevant today as they were over 2,000 years ago.

This particular production of *Women of Troy* uses a recent translation by Kenneth McLeish which premiered at the Royal National Theatre in London in 1995. The translation is refreshing and vital, giving new depth to Euripides' explorations of moral dilemmas. Co-director Ann Cooper Albright, assistant professor of dance, says the ethical questions that motivate *Women of Troy* are "the rebuilding of a community's structure, the loyalty to state and the position of the conquered, particularly for the women considered as prizes of war."

The ensemble of directors, producers, technical crew and cast have gone through painstaking trouble to ensure that the audience hears these issues as they are addressed through the action of the play. Attempting to confront these weighty historical and socially important issues may seem risky, especially when they are to be carried by an ancient work that reflects the gender biases of its time. Yet this production is overwhelmingly successful. *Women of Troy* is an intense production. It forces you to think about these characters, the situation they are in, their utter tragedy. Emotions run at maximum output at every moment. This is no light drama - this is pain, raw and real - and beautiful.

The cast is headed by visiting performer and Oberlin College alum, Alyssa Bongiorno, OC'90. Bongiorno recently graduated from the Julliard School, in the spring of 1995, where she spent four years in training. As Hecuba, the former Queen of Troy, Bongiorno provides *Women of Troy* with central focus from which the rest of the play emanates. Like the staff with which Hecuba holds herself upright,

Bongiorno is critical in supporting the action of the play at all times. Her speeches are long and frequent, and very well delivered, using body language and raw physicality to give the grief of this fallen leader an immense presence that seems to fill the stage, even when she is not speaking. Bongiorno's voice is raspy and deep, almost chafed. The pain in her voice and her words is brutal and you know that she is telling true when she speaks. The wiry frame of this young woman becomes that of ageless grief. While on stage, Alyssa Bongiorno is Hecuba.

The power of Hecuba is not hers alone, however. The effect of Bongiorno's performance is doubled, if not tripled, by the chorus. The chorus is arguably the main character of *Women of Troy*. Constantly in motion, always on stage, sometimes dancing, frequently beating their breasts in agony, the chorus is the punctuation for every spoken line in the play. The members of the chorus respond to every act, every word, and they do not flag. The emotion expressed by the chorus never seems tired or impersonal. The reactions are continuously fresh and undimmed, as if the chorus members all have wounds that they rip open anew every few minutes.

This active participation by the chorus is a fairly unique concept, since in most Greek tragedy the chorus simply functions as background, an ancient recitative. In this performance, the objective was changed from using a collective choral voice to emphasizing the individual. The members of the chorus were encouraged by the directing staff to seek out and research different characters. All of the choral members have names for the women they play, even though the audience does not hear them. They are people, not simply voices in this production, people with real crises and a very tangible pain, which they constantly express through motions of timeless, ritualized mourning. The chorus' high-point is during the burning of Troy near the end of the play, where members of the chorus whirl around the stage, while Hecuba stands in the center, making one of her final speeches. The effect is something like fire. The bright costumes of the women twist like leaping flames. Their fierce motion, ebbing and rising with the words of others, is a magnifying glass on the flow of *Women of Troy*.

Other strong performances are also given by college sophomore Meave Shelton (Cassandra) and college senior Eryn Johnson (Andromache). Cassandra's insanity rejoices on stage, complete with fire and laurels, staggering, dancing and laughing in her desire for revenge. Shelton is both pure and vicious at the same time. Johnson's performance as Hector's wife, Andromache, is wonderfully laden with angry blame. Of all the women, Andromache is the one most stripped of identity, or so she would have us believe. Johnson gives her character rage that sometimes is almost primal, and when Andromache is forced to show her "honor" by giving up her son to die, we can see how forced the effort is, and how basic maternal nature is often more powerful than cultural persuasion could ever be.

The musical crew should not be neglected either. The orchestra is small but potent. Composer double-degree senior Leon Rothenberg uses the music as "an extra actor, often playing the role of a character's inner voice. Five musicians and two singers ... sit just offstage where they can take musical cues from the action on-stage. This gives them a chance to really interact with the actors ." The music is sympathetic to the women on stage. In other situations, as when Menelaus appears on stage for the first time, the music is as mocking as one would expect the women of Troy's thoughts to be. The musical voice is symbiotic with that of the chorus, and just as powerful.

The technical crew of *Women of Troy* has also worked very hard to establish the correct mood for the production. The lighting of the set, done by college senior Caleb Wertenbaker, is designed to brighten and dim during the course of the play as if portraying the course of sunrise into sunset. Helen of Sparta, the woman who began the Trojan War, appears at high noon, when light seems to pour out in pure white gold from above. It almost hurts to look at her. One can feel the heat of Helen's power, as well as of the others' hatred of her blazing in the light. Helen is also costumed in a gold sheath that exudes warm sexuality. Ironically, she is veiled like a modest virgin.

Costume designer Chris Flaharty, associate professor of theater and dance, displays a certain wit in his costuming of Helen. It works. The set, designed by Oberlin College Technical Director Jim Smith, is also crucial to the overall power of the performance. The circle in center stage is reminiscent of places such as Stonehenge and American Indian burial mounds.

Cotler describes the stage as embodying what is supposed to be "sacred ground." Smith succeeds in capturing the spiritual within his set. The twistings of the maze on stage reflect the internal turnings of these mourning women.

Women of Troy is a powerhouse of a production. From the first appearance of the gods, Poseidon and Athena, to the final words spoken by the chorus, the performance maintains complete balance. It is an integrated performance, and its success comes from every level. Weakness is not allowed to exist in this play. In spite of the political impotence of women in Ancient Greece, these women show their vitality in the only way they are allowed - their mourning, their agony and their ultimate bravery in the face of slavery.

Women of Troy goes up in Hall Auditorium this weekend. Performances are at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday. A discussion with Dramaturg Thomas Van Nortwick, professor of classics, will follow Saturday's performance. Tickets are \$4 for OC students and children under 18, \$6 for faculty/staff/senior citizens and \$8 for all others.



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