movies... 'Electra' at Coolidge Corner Theatre

By Gilberto Ponce-Guerrero

Unfortunately, Michael Cacoyiannis's version of Euripides's 'Electra' is not satisfactory. In 'Istoria' and 'The Woman is Black,' Cacoyiannis emerged as a particularly gifted director, and the present failure should come as a shock to those who, like myself, had high hopes concerning his work. An alternating circumstance may be the inherent difficulty of the subject. To my knowledge, there has been no successful filmic rendering of Greek tragedy. The difficulties do not appear to be unmountable, though I could imagine, for instance, a film in the tradition of Eisenstein's magnificent 'Ivan the Terrible' — to be shown by the Lecture Series Committee this week, incidentally — with its majesty of artificiality and stylized settings. Or else a treatment similar to Orson Welles's rendering of 'Othello' or 'Macbeth,' in which the personality of the film-maker overrules the original work, and the result is more Welles than Shakespeare. In this way the result may not be comparable in quality to the classic work, but at least it is a creative treatment, a hundred times preferable to a houndslodge adaptation of the original work.

In 'Electra,' Cacoyiannis has not given up his pretensions as a film-maker, but, on the other hand, has preserved a great deal of the basic theatrical qualities of the tragedy. Cinema and Euripides have not been successfully interfused; indeed, both tendencies clash unpleasantly sometimes. The artificiality of the basic work is lost to unorthodox camera movements and settings. The dialogue, scenes, generally over-theatrical, fall for the most part to consistency on the screen. Cacoyiannis's techniques, although often elegant, are not adequately integrated with his basic material. Theatrical and cinematic elements are often unrelated, at times in unpleasant contradiction.

Perhaps the most obvious mistake are the pastoral settings. They seem an extraneous element — much in the same way as the ocean in Oliver's 'Hamlet.' In 'Electra,' the mistake is far more important: the over-provincial country settings, with their directness and naturalness, seem too close to real life to fit the basic artificiality of the tragedy. Are we expected to take the chorus of black-dressed, amphoracarrying, slow-moving Greek women as peasant women? The uneasy mixture of reality and artificiality is perhaps the basic failure of the film.

Flashes of Cacoyiannis's talent save the film from a total failure, however. The final sequence, involving the murder of Clytemnestra by her two children, is outstanding. The dialogue some between Electra and her mother is unusually effective. Irene Papas, whose ever-weping Electra is of help most of the time, delivers her best lines here. The character of Clytemnestra, although overly similar to my taste, is used advantageously: her ignorance of what has been planted against her makes the treachery inevitable. Cacoyiannis's techniques convey the tragic effect of the murder very well; a cut to the chorus, when one of the women runs and cries "Her own children are murdering her" is an example. In this sequence Cacoyiannis handles his material much more freely, dropping many of the theatrical elements; none of the women in the chorus had dared to move swiftly before. Unfortunately, the crime sequence is only an exception; for the most part, 'Electra' is a failure.