Huntington produces an ingenious Iphigenia

IPHIGENIA

BY NIC KELMAN

T he Iphigenia of Euripides could easily be counted among the most interesting of its tragedies if not for its unusual history and form. Both Iphigenia in Tauris and Iphigenia at Aulis are classified as tragedies, yet they have unexpectedly happy endings.

Iphigenia in Tauris is unique in itself, as it uses characters from Homer's Iliad to enact a story which originated with Euripides. Furthermore, the prologue to this play, Iphigenia at Aulis, was written nine years afterwards and was finished and heavily reworked posthumously by Euripides' son.

The Huntington Theatre Company has decided to perform both of the Iphigenias as a single play in two parts (the prequel first in order), calling their production simply Iphigenia. The story is about the daughter of King Agamemnon, Iphigenia, who is tricked into going to Aulis by her father's promise of marriage to Achilles. Upon arrival, she is saved from the_autor, which means all too likely that this was merely a play to get her to Aulis so that she may be sacrificed (as the goddess Artemis' request) by her father to ensure the safety of the Greek fleet. Iphigenia relents herself to her fate, which is saved by Artemis herself at the knife's point. Iphigenia takes her to Tauris, where she is initially Iphigenia as her priestess.

Tauris has the custom of sacrificing strangers to Artemis, and many years later, in Iphigenia at Aulis, it is told that Apollo manages to escape back to Greece. Since Iphigenia has not seen Orestes since he was an infant, she does not recognize him. Orestes is due to be sacrificed, when all becomes clear to both and they plan to escape back to Greece. The Taurian king discovers their escape and sets out to kill them both, but is checked at the last minute by Artemis.

The combined plays make an excellent and original Greek story, while at the same time not carrying the predictable tragic ending. The plays also clearly bear the mark although Iphigenia at Aulis is slightly scarred by its reworking of Euripides' original story, while at the same time it preserves the play's more popular, popular style and his humane treatment of the gods as actual characters. His unusual use of expanded tragic rates is marked by the translation, but it is still possible to see his Iphigenia's younger brother, Orestes, at the center of an epic tale of family love, hatred and revenge.

What is most interesting about this production is the way that proud Greek tragedies are performed by the young American authors. The versions are comic. The types appear so exaggerated and cliched to our modern way of thinking (not surprising, as Greek dramatic tradition is the foundation for all drama since) that the audience could not take them seriously. Thus, in scenes which were intended to be resolved with sorrow, the audience would burst out laughing. This is a strange circumstance, and it is almost worth going to see the production solely for this phenomenon.

What is even stranger is that this effect has nothing to do with the director's interpretation of the plays. Except for when Athena appears at the end of Iphigenia in Tauris, Tazewell Thompson treats the plays with the utmost respect for Greek tragic tradition. His choice of set design - the stage resembles an amphitheater and ancient costume combined with his style, really make you feel transported back to 400 B.C., when Euripides' plays were first presented.

Nancy Schertler's lighting is stunning. Both subtle and impressing, her simple use of spots perfectly evokes the mood of each scene. Perhaps even more remarkable is the use of music during the plays. The whole production has actually been scored, and every important moment in the play has a background of music exactly as if it were on film. This is extremely surprising, innovative, and works very well, although it is occasionally it comes off as a clutch for the actors.

The actors themselves are strong, and in Iphigenia at Aulis, fill their roles probably as Euripides imagined them doing. Agamemnon (Francis Guinan) is king-like in both poise and voice; Achilles (Matthew Loney) is beautifully arrogant, and Menelaus (Jonathan Peck) is suitably devious. Iphigenia (Shari Simpson) herself is weak, as she should be, but is at times a little unbelievable, while her mother Clytemnestra (Luanne Mitchil) is rather too stereotyped as the matrarchal protector of her family.

There is a change of Iphigenia for Iphigenia in Tauris which works very well. Karen Evans-Kandel comes across as a more mature and deeper character than the Iphigenia of some twenty years ago at Aulis. Her performance is interesting and intricate in its detail of emotion. Orestes (David Patrick Kelly) is equally excellent as her troubled brother, while Matthew Loney, this time as Pytho, does a superb job of being on stage most of the time with very few lines and managing to avoid looking awkward.

All told, this is an excellent, if occasionally slightly amateurish, production. It is traditional in all the right areas yet also avant-garde. If you enjoy Greek drama, and Euripides in particular, this is a rare opportunity to see a fairly unique performance. If you know nothing of Greek drama, Iphigenia is definitely a wise place to start.

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