

## “The Trojan Women” at the Kraine Theater

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Melissa Johnson as Cassandra and Amy Lee Pearsall as Hecuba in "The Trojan Women"

The enduring appeal of classic plays is sometimes hard to understand. In Shakespeare’s case, the play can be literally hard to understand. Even well-educated viewers can miss out substantially on the Bard’s subtleties of language, not to mention the differences in sensibility between twenty-first century Moderns and sixteenth century Elizabethans. And he wrote in English! With Greek drama – particularly tragedy – the difference between how they saw the world and how we see the world is particularly wide. Though the Athenian government of the 5th century was democratic, [only ten percent of the total population was enfranchised](#), and every family of means owned slaves. Though some ancient Greeks invented rationalism and science, their most devout religious rituals looked like a mix of Burning Man and Bonnaroo. And their view of fate was far more bleak than our belief in Divine Providence, which, in our secular age, we call American Exceptionalism.

And yet modern adaptations of Greek tragedy in the English speaking world are everywhere. After the fall of the USSR and our late imperial adventures in the ancient home of the Persian empire, it seems the

Greeks have been put to work to help explain to American audiences exactly what the dangers of American hegemony are. Sometimes the adaptation tries so hard to make the play relevant it both strips it of its historical uniqueness and fails to make the connection to modernity. Occasionally [an exceptional production](#) manages to do both. Kristin Hoffmann’s production of Euripides’s *The Trojan Women* falls somewhere in between. For a viewer who knows nothing about the play or its original context, elements may seem confusing or annoying. For the connoisseur some “adaptations” may seem gratuitous. On the whole, however, this production works and is both entertaining and edifying.

First, the critiques. Number one: the play is a tragedy, so we must expect a fair amount of wailing and gnashing of teeth. But in tragedy – especially for modern audiences – less is more. More emotion is communicated through silence than screaming. More of the meaning of the text is comprehensible if it is shorn of excessive histrionics. And the Kraine theater is too poorly soundproofed to handle very many blood-curdling shrieks. Number two: once or twice I thought I heard the sound of a helicopter suggesting, along with the costumes of the women, our current war in Afghanistan. And number three, if the intention there was to draw a parallel between Athenian and American imperialism, the choice of using Gilbert Murray’s 1905 translation with its archaic “thee”s and “thou”s was just confusing. Are the Greeks supposed to be Americans and the Trojans our Eastern Others? If so, they should speak like Americans and not Elizabethan Englishmen.

Now the praises. Other than the random helicopter noise, Ms. Hoffman doesn’t spoon feed us any conclusions about the morality or immorality, the prudence or ignorance of our contemporary policymakers. Euripides himself is thoroughly ambivalent about the impact of the Argive victory over the lives of the conquered Trojans. Hecuba’s nihilistic lament that she has seen the hand of god and that it holds nothing for human kind – except punishment – is balanced by her recognition that without their tragic struggle and failure they would not have won enduring fame, which for the ancient Greeks was the greatest, indeed the only worthy human goal. A truism of film says comedy is a wide shot, tragedy is a close up. Ms. Hoffman provides close ups and most of the time lets the tragedy speak for itself.

The real success of this play rides on Hecuba’s long-suffering shoulders, and Amy Lee Pearsall who plays Hecuba deserves a large share of praise for making this production a success. As a fallen queen she is dignified and restrained, a woman who both feels her hard fate with a woman’s tenderness and suffers through it with a woman’s strength. She is the anchor that holds the other women in place just when the winds of war are about to blow them to the four corners of the Earth. Ms. Pearsall’s charisma is the cement that holds the drama together and ultimately makes it relevant and appealing to the contemporary viewer.

## ***The Trojan Women***

*by Euripides*

### ***The Kraine Theater***

*85 East 4th Street between 1st Ave and Ave A*

***July 7-23***

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