

Greek Tragedy Wears a New, Brash Mask

By Jonathan Kalb

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Sophocles' "Women of Trachis" is packed with sex, gore, desperation and verbal beauty. If it isn't staged very often, one reason is that the plot hinges on a twist that is hard to swallow today. Why would Deianira, Heracles' adoring and sensible wife, believe that such a glaringly suspicious character — a centaur that Heracles shot for trying to rape her — would then want to help the couple stay together by giving Deianira a magical love potion?

In Kate E. Ryan's delightful and perceptive contemporary adaptation, directed by Alice Reagan and produced by Target Margin Theater as part of its Hellenic Laboratory series, obliviousness becomes the play's central theme, elevated to a kind of hubris. Deianira, played with fabulously distracted lucidity by Heidi Schreck, is a desperate housewife-cum-celebrity-spouse in a sleek, leopard-print dress, who literally itches with longing for her roving-eyed, absentee husband.

The chorus consists of three dreamy, immature young women (Birgit Huppuch, Jodi Lin and Rebecca Lingafelter) in pink dresses and flower bracelets, who drink Diet Coke out of a plastic cooler and react to the increasingly serious situation with twittering, trivialities and bromides. It's never quite clear why such a smart, worldly queen would surround herself with such airheads, but that problem fades away in the end because the point apparently is that obtuseness, whatever its source, is fatal, particularly to women.

Ms. Ryan is far from the first playwright to update a Greek play with pop songs, casual modern speech and references to things like Xanax and computer games. There's a special psychological alertness and pungency to this *mélange*, though, that Ms. Reagan shrewdly strengthens in her superbly cast and infectiously energetic one-hour production.

The two roles deliciously played by Debargo Sanyal — the royal son Hyllus, as a snooty teenager in a golf shirt and hiking boots, and the royal gofer Lichas, as a snide celebrity assistant in white glasses and shoes — are reason enough to see the show.

My one dramaturgical quibble is with the reductive portrayal, in the final scene, of Heracles (Todd d'Amour) dying when the supposed love potion turns out to be poison. Portraying him merely as a bad daddy and a serial adulterer with a secret taste for genital mutilation reads as a cheap shot beside all Ms. Ryan's other whimsically acute decisions. Luckily, the swipe is fleeting, and never completely drains the ending of its hard-earned gravity.



Debargo Sanyal and Heidi Schreck, front, and behind, from left, Birgit Huppuch, Jodi Lin and Rebecca Lingafelter, in "Women of Trachis."