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Theater review: 'Orestes, a Tragic Romp at the Folger Theatre

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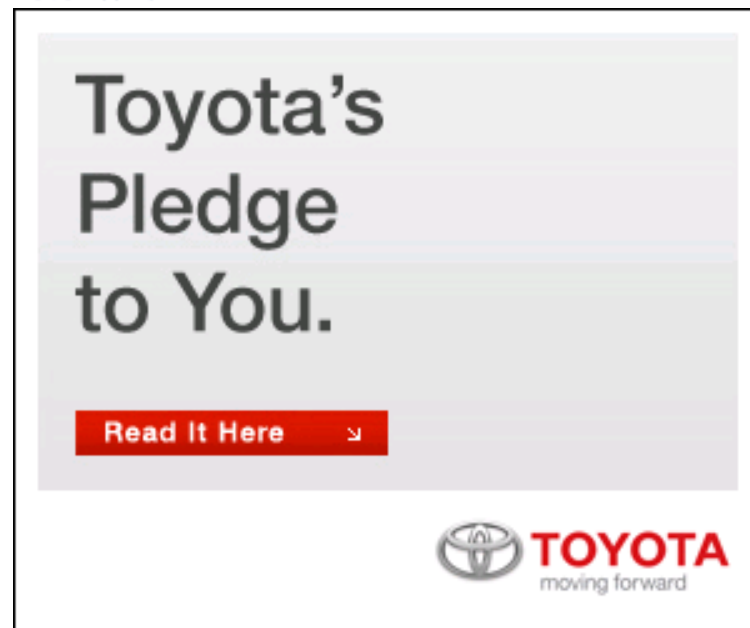
You may have been led to believe that in Greek tragedy, things end badly. Well, the folks at "[Orestes, a Tragic Romp](#)" have news for you. A man can, it seems, carry out the revenge murder of his mother and be condemned to death and then plot the assassination of his mother's celebrity sister and take her daughter hostage and still save both his own neck and his right to rule a nice Mediterranean kingdom.

That's because, as this sharply-turned-out adaptation at Folger Theatre reveals, he can count on Lynn Redgrave to have his back. Hers is the voice of Apollo in director Aaron Posner's sure-handed version of Euripides' "Orestes," a production that mines with ironic flair the powers of the gods to sanitize the messes kicked up by them and their human subjects.

Apollo makes his presence felt in the final minutes of the play, whose verses have been pleasingly re-engineered for a modern ear by dramatist Anne Washburn, author of the witty "The Internationalist." As Redgrave -- doing her best vocal impersonation of a stentorian deity -- announces the reversal of the gruesome fates awaiting Orestes (Jay Sullivan) and his sister Electra (Holly Twyford), the assembled Greeks take in the information with confused looks that seem to say, "Okay . . . ?"


No one appears more bewildered than Sullivan's divinely pardoned Orestes, who along with the others produces a tiny flag from under his costume and intones a benediction to the gods and the glorious future. "Hail holy victory!"

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Sullivan chants as he glances from side to side, wanly waving his flag.

Orestes' shell-shocked gaze seems a fitting embodiment for the director's and playwright's take on Euripides in this world premiere, delectably embroidered by composer James Sugg's choral hymns. The crimes of men have nothing on the whims of the gods, and Posner and Washburn do an effective job here of letting us absorb through a contemporary filter an ambiguity in the belief of a relationship between Orestes' actions and the universe's mystical grand design.

Anyone who saw Ethan McSweeney's irreverent updating of Euripides' "Ion" last year at Shakespeare Theatre Company is acquainted with the impulse to treat an ancient text with a respect tinged with skepticism. "Orestes, a Tragic Romp" carries on that trend, though without some of the transparently rendered pop cultural satire of the earlier production. Washburn does indulge at times in some cheeky modern referencing: A character mentions that the supposedly unbiased proceedings against Orestes and Electra "will be a fair and balanced trial." But she refrains from turning the piece into campy spectacle, relying instead on audiences' own antennae for what feels incongruous.

Euripides is regarded as a down-to-earth alternative to his contemporaries writing in a tragic vein, Aeschylus and Sophocles, and his "Orestes" was one of the most popular plays of antiquity. The plot does, in fact, possess enough pulp for a decent tabloid cover or two: Tormented to madness by the Furies after his murder of unfaithful Clytemnestra -- who had killed their father, Agamemnon -- Orestes is watched over by his conspirator-sister as they await the life-or-death judgment of the people of Argos.

They're kept company by the vigilant Chorus, vibrantly embodied here by five young actresses, who provide the diverting incantations, songs and dances that serve as dramatic breaks in the action. Their skills are certainly appreciated, as the brother and sister hatch out a baroque scheme of added vengeance after their last hope for salvation -- Agamemnon's brother Menelaus (Chris Genebach) -- wimps out on them. It's sly Electra, played by the equally crafty Twyford, who puts the final touches on a plan that includes slaying Menelaus's despised Trojan wife Helen (also played by Genebach). Electra suggests they insure their safety by holding hostage Helen's daughter, Hermione (Margo Seibert).

With the actors dressed by costume designer Jessica Ford to look as if they have a foot in modernity, set designer Daniel Conway places them in the bricked courtyard of the palace of Agamemnon. The garden beds filled with rocks

seem to mock them, as they wait to learn whether they will be subjected to the customary punishment for murder: stoning.

The performances are across-the-board solid, from the expressive Chorus to Sullivan's intense Orestes, who ping-pongs between our contempt and sympathy. That duality works well for a clever evening that allows us to appreciate Euripides even when we're looking a bit askance at his handiwork.

Orestes, a Tragic Romp

Adapted from Euripides by Anne Washburn. Directed by Aaron Posner. Composer and sound, James Sugg; lighting, Tyler Micoleau; movement, Patty Gallagher. With Lauren Culpepper, Rebecca Hart, Marissa Molnar, Margo Seibert, Rachel Zampelli. About 1 hour 40 minutes. Through March 7 at Folger Theatre, 201 East Capitol St. SE. Visit <http://www.folger.edu/theatre> or call 202-544-7077.

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