

BWW Reviews: Blood, Guts and Classic Troubie Mayhem in ABBAMEMNON

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After a particularly long laundry list of names in which Helen of Troy jumps out as the only familiar one, Chorus Leader **Rob Nagle** says in a completely deadpan voice, "Don't worry... that's the last name you'll recognize tonight," and everyone bursts into laughter. More than one person in the audience had already been wondering if they'd be able to follow the story in this Aggamemnon meets ABBA invention and, with that one statement, he made sure loyal fans knew the Troubies had their backs.

Turns out it doesn't matter if you know your Greek classics or not because this latest Troubie original takes on the task of explaining and recapping the characters and story as it goes along. No audience member is left behind when it comes to these hilarious shows so you can relax and enjoy the view...unless you come late, like the woman who sat next to me found out. I can vouch for the fact that she wasn't a plant because she was really sweet, completely embarrassed, and had no idea they were going to sing an entire song dedicated to putting her on the spot. Ah the joy of being a first-timer.

A Troubie pre-show is always unique and this time around it starts off as a photo op with masked guards posing for pictures like they had been relocated from Hollywood Boulevard, "photo op" sign and all. They are initially placed strategically around the imposing set, which has been designed with quite a bit of flair by **Morgan Rusler** and beautifully lit by **Jeremy Pivnick**. The whole effect is quite dramatic, especially with the addition of **Robert Arturo Ramirez's** rich atmospheric sound design. It all makes a striking welcome into the world of the play.

Also part of the set-up is ABBA's classic "Take a Chance on Me," which becomes a pre-show pee song and a killer rock overture featuring musical director **Eric Heiny** on drums with a band that blows this show out of the water. His musicians include Kevin McCourt (keyboards), Linda Taylor (guitar), Dana Decker (bass) and Ginger Murphy & Jon Drovoza (cello).

Familiar ABBA hits and lesser known songs get reworked lyrically as is the norm and the arrangements make each one a showpiece even before the singers, choreography and everything else gets added in. The opening number is a rousing upbeat version of "Mamma Mia" which scans perfectly as "ABBA-memnon" and we're off to the chariot races.

If you do remember your Greeks from theatre history class, you'll see that ABBAMEMNON actually follows the usual structure of a Greek tragedy which will help you organize the scenes somewhat in your head. If you don't, it basically means that you're in for a prologue that sets everything up followed by a series of alternating story episodes and chorus commentaries before a final exit scene wraps up the play.

Beth Kennedy takes on prologue duties as a Watchman whose floating head rises up from a Malibu lifeguard tower like the Great Pumpkin. (Yes, ancient Greece is now Malibu for the purpose of this story which provides the

opportunity to add jokes and insert numerous local references). Sporting several blacked out teeth, and dressed in an ancient skull cap and peasant rags she is the funniest person on the stage every time she appears, even if she is just watching what is going on. She also has a natural gift for the classical and delivers the brief sections of text that have been retained magnificently.

Throughout subsequent scenes we meet the rest of the beautiful, athletic, virile characters and hear of their adventures. "Dancing Queen" introduces Abbamemnon (**Matt Walker**) and his sexy wife Clytemnestra (**Monica Schneider**) during the decadence that preceded the 10-year Trojan War. In his absence she will take a lover - paging **Rick Batalla** to aisle 3 where the mustache glue is sold - and when Abbamemnon returns ten years later he will bring with him a slave named Cassandra (**Katherine Donahoe**). She has been given the gift of prophecy by the gods but no one believes her which makes the perfect lead-in to ABBA's "Cassandra" accompanied by a chorus of dancers in white.

There's plenty of comedy at war's expense, including a Herald (**Joseph Keane**) who tells of the battlefield and those who were slaughtered by the spear. Incidentally, he brings his spear with him since it is still sticking out of the front and back of his body. Walker expertly sings and dances his way through orgies and battles in real time and slow motion. He is a vicious and imposing figure who wears some of the most realistic bloody makeup to hit a Troubie stage, yet he isn't above calling a foul when Batalla found himself tongue-tied in a late play. These moments are what the audience lives for and always end up being great fun to watch.

This is one of the strongest productions to date with terrific performances and the kind of delightful theatrical elements that make a Troubie show a real one-of-a-kind experience. Giant belly-laughing puppet heads that look like the theatre critics from The Muppet Show, shadow play, a working chariot, **Molly Alvarez's** outstanding choreography, **Darrin Revitz** as the sacrificed innocent daughter, **Jason Turner's** eye candy version of Menelaus, **Rick Batalla's** punch lines, **Rob Nagle's** touching dramatic work, **Sharon McGunigle's** combination of '80s glam and ancient Greek garb...it all adds up to a winning production.

Wisdom may come from suffering but comedy comes from The Troubies and this latest hilarious reveal from the kings and queens of funny is just what you need to pump up the volume on your summer fun meter. It's a must-see, so go!

ABBAMEMNON

June 6 - July 13, 2014

Troubadour Theatre Company at The **Falcon Theatre**

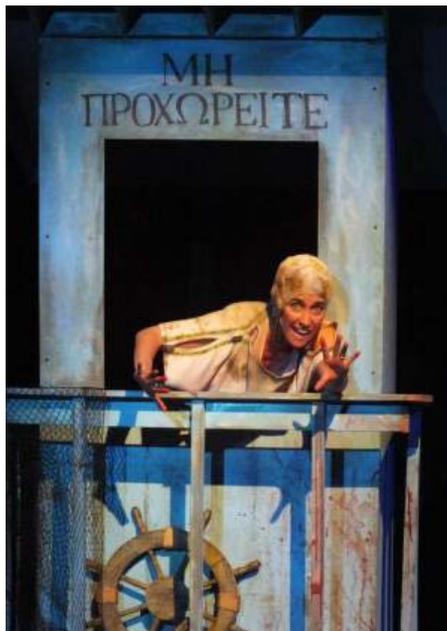
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Beth Kennedy