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Abbamemnon

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Reviewed by Bill Raden

Falcon Theatre

Through July 13



Photo by Chelsea Sutton

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RECOMMENDED:

For nearly 20 years, the Troubadour Theater Company and its director Matt Walker have been expertly transforming the lowly pun into a sublime and surefire form of musical mash-up parody. Their formula is

to pair overly familiar but purposefully mismatched targets of opportunity drawn from the top-40 hit parade, the works of William Shakespeare and maudlin TV and movie favorites.

For the past 2,500 years, Greek tragedy and its dramatic legacy of gods and heroes, epic journeys and bloody battles, regicides, infanticides, incest, cannibalism and adultery have comprised a liturgical soul of heroic transgression for both the theater and what has been called the "Western tradition."

With *Abbamemnon*, which began its own journey in a Getty Villa residency last spring, the Troubies take on the ancients by combining Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* with the insidiously infectious, disco-era songbook of '70s Swedish mega-hit machine ABBA. And a fascinating thing happens: The ensuing onstage antics turn out to be, well, not-so-funny.

Which is not to suggest some sort of failure of satiric imagination on the part of the Troubies. The 12 ABBA song sendups (flawlessly arranged by musical director Eric Heinly) are well up to company par, cleverly re-lyricized (Including a deft, turn-off-your-cellphone curtain raiser version of "Take a Chance on Me") and impeccably fitted to both character and the rising and falling action.

Monica Schneider's camp Clytemnestra (by way of Elvira) is amusingly recast as the "Dancing Queen" of Malibu, whose royal subjects are wittily costumed by Sharon McGunigle to look like extras from *Logan's Run*. And beloved company lynchpins like Beth Kennedy (as the toothless Watchman) and Rick Batalla (a Fu Manchu-mustached Aegisthus) are each allowed to strut their respective stuff in comic arias that include an inspired Batalla bit of audience hazing using the regurgitated remains of Thyestes' children.

What is notably missing is Walker himself. By casting himself as King Abbamemnon, the director-performer is effectively sidelined offstage for far too much of the action, denying the show his accustomed role of madcap ringmaster, who in the past has provided emergency comic torque by pitching unscripted curveballs at the cast at the first inkling of flagging stage energy.

But the chief culprit may simply be Aeschylus. Even in the Troubies' truncated, irreverent and anachronism-mutated incarnation, enough of *Agamemnon*'s timeless poetic reach remains to generate pathos under the parody and sweep up the audience in the universal pull of the play's indelible themes of hubris, fate and the conflicting justice claims of the blood feud.

The laugh-dampening persistence of that Aeschylean spirit is perhaps most poignantly present in the company-performed finale that sets the ABBA ballad "I Had a Dream" to a tongue-in-cheek, *Wizard of Oz*-like retraction of the evening's epic bloodletting as a mere figment of Kennedy's grotesque nightmare. Rather than anything risible, however, the number becomes suffused with a sad, almost childlike yearning for even the possibility of heroic nobility, however tragically flawed, that has been long lost to the contractual exigencies of commerce and the ineluctable passage of time.

Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Dr., Burbank; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 4 pm.; through July 13. (818) 955-8101, falcontheatre.com.