PLAYWRIGHT’S NOTE

Euripides’ Helen

At the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Villa
Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays, September 6–29, 2012

Athens and Sparta had been at war for the worst part of two decades when Euripides wrote Helen. Three years before, Euripides penned perhaps the world’s most devastating antiwar drama, The Trojan Women. At its core, Helen is an even more war-weary work than its famous predecessor. In The Trojan Women, Euripides presented his audience with the savage results of a war fought for the most venal of reasons. In Helen, he dares to assert that even the war’s venal impetus was trumped up from the start—an illusion. Weapons of mass destruction, indeed! Yet the tone of Helen, with the theme of mistaken identity at its heart, is far from the tragedy of The Trojan Women. Our play is above all else a romance: a love story of the middle aged.

In attempting to adapt Helen for a contemporary American audience, my guiding principle was to honor the immediacy of Euripides’ themes, thoughts, and devices. He has something direct and unfiltered to say to us in our age of political trumpery, stolen identity, and switcheroo culpabilities. I wanted our treatment of Euripides’ play to speak to an American audience in 2012 as directly as he spoke to his fellow citizens 2,400 years ago, while keeping his structure and tone intact.

To accomplish this, Jon, David, and I set out to find contemporary analogues that would immediately resonate with a postmodern audience. Ancient Greek drama, of course, has its own time-honored forms, devices, and stock characters with which its audience would be immediately familiar. We looked to musical forms, storytelling devices, and characters from Hollywood’s golden era and beyond to present a world that a twenty-first century American could recognize firsthand.

We hope the handling of our cinema siren chorus and the musical styling of its odes, our demi–dei ex machina, our sassy supporting players, the sometimes-screwball bent of our stichomythic dialogue, and, of course, the perils of our leading lady and her hoodwinked shipwrecked spouse will allow you unfettered access to the old-school romance of this most modern of ancient dramatists.

— Nick Salamone.