

Review**Euripides' 'Helen' reveals the woman behind the pretty face**

By BARBARA M. BANNON
Special to The Tribune

"Expect the unexpected" advises the chorus toward the end of "Helen," this year's Classical Greek Theatre Festival production at the University of Utah. They're merely stating what the audience has already discovered: "Helen" is far from a typical Greek tragedy.

Instead of unrelenting death and destruction, usually recounted in vivid detail by messengers, we witness the joyful reunion of two lovers long separated by war and fate. Instead of a great king or hero brought low through pride or blindness, we are treated to a portrait of a wronged and faithful wife. Instead of woman as victim, Helen is a clever and resourceful character who devises the plan that ultimately frees her and her husband, Menelaus, from a potentially tragic situation.

And most amazing of all, "Helen" has a happy ending, thanks mostly to the silliest, far-fetched *deus ex machina* Euripides ever devised: Helen's twin brothers, Castor and Pollux, drop in from the afterlife and stay the avenging hand of her rejected Egyptian suitor. And yes, "Helen" takes place in Egypt, the only Greek play ever set in that remote, exotic country.

Euripides appears determined to overturn, at times even burlesque, the

'Helen'

Presented by University of Utah Classical Greek Theatre

- **WHERE:** The lawn north of the U. Performing Arts Building and east of Pioneer Memorial Theatre in Salt Lake City. (In case of rain, the production moves to Libby Gardner Hall on President's Circle).
- **WHEN:** Saturday, and Sunday at 9 a.m. At 8:30 a.m., dramaturge James Svendsen offers an introduction that I highly recommend.
- **RUNNING TIME:** 70 minutes with no intermission.
- **TICKETS:** \$12, \$9 for faculty and staff, and \$6 for students at 801-581-7100 or www.kingtix.com.
- **BOTTOM LINE:** If your idea of ancient Greek drama is all gloom and doom, "Helen" offers delightful surprises and reveals that Euripides actually had a sense of humor.

conventions of Greek tragedy and demolish the legendary image of Helen, largely created by Homer in *The Iliad*, as the woman whose beauty and vanity "toppled Troy and ruined Greece." According to Euripides, Helen wasn't even there, which makes Menelaus realize "we fought for a shadow, died for a shadow."

Kenneth McLeish's colloquial, playful adaptation points up the black humor in Euripides' text (even having characters describe Helen as "hell to men." Other lines flash with eloquent insight: Helen observes, "I drag my fate along; my life's a myth.")

The challenge for director Barbara Smith and her student actors is maintaining a balance between the play's lighter moments and its traditional tragic structure and basically serious situation. Helen and Menelaus are exiles struggling to make their way home from a hostile foreign country after a devastating war. Smith handles the mixed tone deftly, and choreographer Brittany Anne Gadbury gives Helen and the chorus ritualistic movement and dance that capture the unique feel of Greek tragedy.

Lauren Elyse Bradley's Helen is lovely and spirited,

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and Patrick Harris' Menelaus shifts easily from dejection to elation and ironic insight as his fortunes change. As the young pharaoh Theoclymenus, John Terry's arrogant bravado makes him gullible, while Leticia Vélez gives his prophetic sister Theonoe a regal sense of justice. Stacey

Hull, Ruth Ann Jones, Deborah Johnson, Leticia Vélez, and Katherine Wroble handle the choral passages with confidence, and Wroble has a nice comic moment as a smart-mouth doorkeeper.

Nina Vought's set with its sphinxes, hieroglyphics, and sand-colored backdrop transports us to Egypt, while

Brenda Van der Weil's costumes sharply distinguish the worlds of Egypt and Greece and situate Helen, in luminous white and gold, somewhere between them.

Euripides is described as the most modern of the Greek tragedians. "Helen" proves that he also knew how to entertain an audience.