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Music by Michael Rupert
Directed by Joe Zingo

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THEATER BY SUZI STEFFEN

Ages of Grief

The never-ending tale of those bereft by war

To quote one depressed young man in the lobby after opening night of the UO's production of *The Trojan Women*, "That's a great play to go to when you're sad."

Not. But personal sadness, if it's unrelated to the tragedies of war, falls away under the relentless onslaught of overarching despair in this piece. Essentially a linked series of monologues with an occasional Trojan chorus, *The Trojan Women* is Ellen McLaughlin's adaptation of Euripides' 415 BCE piece about the damage war does to victor and conquered alike.

The play originally premiered at a time when the Greek city-state of Athens had just committed serious atrocities in a battle, and McLaughlin's adaptation premiered in 1994 in the Balkan Theatre Project. Irrational wars in which the supposed victors defile themselves through their ruination of great cities and their slaughter and rape of civilians: We don't need a Ph.D. to know why new UO Theatre Arts prof Theresa May chose this one to direct.

Some might remember the names of Greeks and Trojans made famous by *The Iliad*, but one doesn't necessarily need to understand Helen's relationship to Paris or know how Hector died to fathom the depth of the Trojan women's losses. And one doesn't need ancient Greek stagecraft to comprehend that Kristin Halay's flute, haunting and lonely, cries like the voices of the dead.

Action begins long before the play starts; as the audience enters, women and children mill around a small refugee camp near the Aegean Sea, below the battlements of the destroyed city. Lorney O'Connor's set, which resembles the bombed-out rubble of Sarajevo, Baghdad or the Bexhill refugee camp in *Children of Men*, conveys colorless, dusty despondency. Regularly, a Greek soldier (James M. Engberg) shoves one more woman through the security gate, throwing a blanket after her. An apparent journalist pops in to take pictures of the grieving, wounded women. When Hecuba, Queen of Troy (Jennifer Thomas), her daughter-in-law Andromache (Johanna Erdmann) and Andromache and dead Hector's 5-year-old son Astyanax (Jon Christon) enter the fray, the rest of the women are both shocked at their Queen's condition and relieved to have a focal point for their broken community.

Hecuba's daughter Cassandra (Jackie Peterman), tortured by her gift of prophecy which no one believes, lands in the camp during the first third of the play. She issues a long, rambling monologue that points to the coming sexual slavery of the Trojan women. Of the named roles, Peterman as Cassandra best embodies her character although Thomas as Hecuba, the focal point of the play, waxes in power near the bitter end.

Almost all of the acting is uneven, but the women in the chorus provide excellent support to the principals, including Helen. We soon learn that the oblivious photographer actually is Helen (Natali de Assis), for whose beauty men caused the Trojan War (though as she points out when Hecuba confronts her, that's not her fault). Unfortunately, de Assis overplays Helen and does not convince us of her supposed self-torment.

Part of the challenge of this script comes from the awful drone of refugee life, which breaks only for a few even more appalling acts. The most sickening of all will come as no surprise to those who know what always happens to a conquered power's royal children, but the sharp pain of it disperses any shred

of hope. Andromache, who not so long before was saying bravely, "I'll find a way to live life even in shame, even in bondage and degradation — it's only my body that can be owned," now collapses, utterly beaten.

All I could think during the interminably depressing climax was, "At least Aeneas escapes Troy! And he'll found Rome, which will kick the Greeks' asses!" But then I realized that Euripides was writing 400 years before Virgil wrote *The Aeneid*. And it's cold comfort in any case to know that a conquering nation, full of pride and self-righteous possession, will one day fall subject to other forces. "One day" happens far too late. And when it comes, who will feel triumphant? Euripides, McLaughlin and Theresa May convince us that in war, though some lose everything, no one ever truly wins. **EW**



Andromache (Johanna Erdman) comforts Cassandra (Jackie Peterman)

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Opening Nights

Three Guys Naked From the Waist Down

Opens Friday, March 16 at Actors Cabaret of Eugene. No, it's not *The Full Monty* at ACE; Jim Roberts tells us that it's a metaphor for vulnerability. Which we all know from those dreams about being naked at school or work, right? These guys are "naked" onstage as comedians who make it big on Johnny Carson and get their own show, for which they have to (horrors!) dress as women. Apparently, the world's treatment and their misogynist feelings get to them, and the off-Broadway musical focuses on how they deal with their naked feelings. Show dates are March 16 & 17, 23 & 24 and 30 & 31 and April 6 & 7. Call 683-4368 for tickets.