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Review: *Orestes* at The Off Center



Frenetically paced and shouted more than it's spoken, **Will Hollis Snider's** adaptation of *Orestes* seems focused on dusting off the myth, sleeking it down, and putting it directly in an audience's face. The thing just fucking *starts*, no time wasted, with Orestes dragging Helen into Apollo's temple, and the intensity doesn't really drop off for the next hour and a half. It's a little bit strange—Snider, who clearly spent a great deal of time ripping pages out of his copy of Euripides' script, employed sound designer Adam Hilton to add contemporary flourishes to the production; even the publicity shot on the cover of the program looks like it could well be the poster for a *Fantastic Fest* thriller. So the fact that the go-go-go-go-GO nature of the performances—cranked up to 11 for nearly the entire run-time—is so reminiscent of what we've come to think of as the boilerplate rendering of Greek myth is a little bit disappointing.

It's not **Gabriel Luna**, who carries the show on his back as the title character, who disappoints in this way. While his interpretation of Orestes is manic, flailing, and shouting at the world, Snider's script does a fine job of justifying it. He is, after all, on the verge

of being stoned to death for murdering his mother. And from the onset of Snider's production, it's clear that there's no chance any of the gods are going to drop in at the end to smooth things over.

So as we open the show, Luna bursting into the theater from the entrance doors dragging Smaranda Ciceu's Helen of Troy—last seen starring as a cartoon version of Stanislavsky alongside Luna in Tutto's *Black Snow*—the tension is real, the intensity full-steam. Orestes, haunted by the furies after avenging his father's death by murdering his mother, ostensibly at Apollo's behest, pleads with his uncle Menelaus (**Travis Bedard**), negotiates with his sister Elektra (**Molly McKee**), and faces his accuser (**La Tasha Stephens**, credited as "Voice of the People") without taking more than a handful of breaths. It's an impressive display of lung power, but after similar performances from nearly every other actor on stage—McKee and Karina Dominguez, who appears in a flashback as Orestes' mother, Klytaimnestra, being two notable exceptions—it becomes increasingly unaffectioning.

People have been staging performances that tell Orestes' story for well over two thousand years. Snider's vision of a revamped version comes through in the script, but there's little of that freshness in the performances he pulls out of Stephens, speaking in the trial as the people's voice, wailing about the ruins of Argos, or from Bedard, whose interpretation of Menelaus as a folded-arms badass involves him delivering nearly every line as a shout. It reaches a point where, if *everything's* intense, nothing is.

The intensity Snider strives for comes through in parts, however. The play reaches an emotional climax fairly early on, as we flashback to Orestes' murder of Klytaimnestra, which is intercut with Agamemnon's (**Derek Kolluri**) sacrifice of Iphigenia (**Steffanie Ngo-Hatchie**, in a strong turn). The scene is powerful and surprisingly effective at creating a real sense of tension, especially impressive given that we've been aware since the beginning how this is going to play out. Luna and Dominguez have an easy chemistry, and Kolluri, whose performance throughout the play is uneven, carries his scene nicely.

But Orestes' story begins with the murder of his mother—it doesn't end there—and so we're left with tension that fails to rise and half the play to go after its effective climax. It never succeeds in scaling those heights again, and it takes a stuttering path towards its conclusion. Snider indicated to us in an interview before the show opened that he had planned to stage a version of Euripedes' play with the boring parts cut out, but he missed a couple, and the lack of concision leads to an exhausting ending, with further flashbacks to Agamemnon's launch of the ships and the beginning of the Trojan War shedding light—in the play's most overwrought scene—on questions that no one was asking.

Snider clearly had a vision for Orestes, and his casting of Luna as the lead—and his decision to gear the script toward a non-stop interpretation of the character—show that he's clearly a director capable of making sharp choices. If he's guilty of anything here, it's the fact that he didn't make enough other choices to complement the one at the center of his play. Dominguez, McKee, and Ngo-Hatchie were good ones, but the pedestrian takes on the rest of the cast, and a script that allowed for a performance with almost no quiet/loud dynamics, leave things a bit of a jumble. An intense take on Orestes might have been well served by a subtle Menelaus, or a quieter version of the Argives. It's the difference between a play that succeeds on every level and one that requires an audience to check in and out, waiting for something to break from the sameness of the tone, and *Orestes* falls into the latter camp. The fact that there *are* those moments speaks well of his vision—it just indicates that he's not always going to realize it.

By [dansolomon](#) in [Arts and Entertainment](#) on August 14, 2009 10:28 AM [0 Comments](#) [3 Likes](#) [Likes](#)