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BRIEF MENTION



SUPPLICES, THE SATYR PLAY: CHARLES MEE'S *BIG LOVE*

RUSH REHM

BERKELEY REPERTORY THEATER, long the most adventurous theater company in the San Francisco Bay area, opened its new Roda theater in style this spring with Aeschylus' *Oresteia* (trans. Fagles), followed (on the more intimate thrust stage) by Charles L. Mee's adaptation of Aeschylus' *Danaid* trilogy, entitled *Big Love*. Seeing these productions in tandem reminds one of the similarities between the two trilogies, as if Aeschylus in his *Oresteia* developed and expanded ideas introduced five years earlier in *Danaides*. These include the horrific consequences of male violence, not the least of which involves the tragic female response of killing husbands and turning households into bloodbaths. The primal compulsions that affect human beings—particularly eros and vengeance, immortally hypostasized as Aphrodite and the Furies—drive through both trilogies, countered somewhat by the religious and moral imperatives to grant beleaguered foreigners asylum. Reflecting Athens's radical democracy, Aeschylus emphasizes the perils and responsibilities of a polity that must face the consequences of its own decisions. In dramatic terms, both trilogies tap the power of choral lyric to wash over plot and action, almost like a force of nature, moving the human drama into a wider spatial and temporal context. Aeschylus also exploits the apparent finality of a trial in both works to bring matters to a dramatic close. However, ultimate resolution depends on the fundamentally comedic faith in the curative powers of marriage, family, and time to restore the human community. Addressing these themes in *Big Love*, Mee uses them to construct an entertaining romp. One could say he converts Aeschylus' *Danaides* into a contemporary satyr play, the paratragic genre for which Aeschylus was famous in antiquity (none of his survive, but one called *Amynone* ended the Danaid tetralogy).

Although only *Supplices* is extant, most scholars agree on the

How do these respond to their primal instincts?

—the balance of comedy is extremely important to counter the horrific wedding

trilogy's dramatic arc.¹ Led by their father Danaos, the fifty Danaids flee from detested marriage with their Egyptian cousins. They receive asylum in Argos, until the Argive leader Pelasgos is defeated in battle and the victorious Egyptians have their connubial way. Commanded by their father, the Danaids murder their husbands on their wedding night—all save Hypermestra, who spares Lynkeus. A trial absolves Hypermestra of disobedience, and Aphrodite celebrates the power of eros, manifest in the marriage of earth and sky. Due to its incomplete story line and the absence of all but a few short fragments from the latter two plays, *Supplices* has not proved popular on the modern stage.

Enter Charles Mee, whose updated version *Big Love* follows (*mutatis mutandis*) the reconstruction outlined above. Missing is Danaos, and (as one might expect) Aeschylus' lyrically and poetically charged language. According to Mee, "getting into a Greek plot is like stepping into a Rolls Royce," and he clearly enjoys the ride.² In earlier plays, Mee has stepped into the plots of Euripides' *Bacchae*, *Orestes*, and *Trojan Women* (in the first half of his *Trojan Women a Love Story*).³ His updated treatments have attracted the interest of classicists, drawn to new translations, contemporary productions, and modern adaptations of ancient material.⁴ Regarding Mee's creative use of Greek tragedy, key questions remain: where is he heading in his smooth-riding import? does some destination guide the journey? whom does Mee pick up along the way?

Answering the last first, *Big Love*—as directed by Les Waters at Berkeley, with a strong cast—sweeps up the audience with its energy and sense of play. It offers an evening of kitsch, froth, stage blood (over-the-top and inoffensive), and body-slammimg physical humor. Although set in Italy—the Pelasgian Piero is a suave villa-owner who "makes arrangements" and "has connections"—this is very much an American play, full of commercial pop culture. For example, the first "chorus" has three representative Danaids singing Leslie Gore's schlock rock "You Don't

¹ See Garvie 1969, esp. 163–233; Johansen and Whittle 1980, 47–55; and the useful summary in Ewans 1996, xxxix–l.

² Quoted in Foley 1999, 5.

³ See previous note; also Foley 2000. Mee's *Orestes* and *Trojan Women a Love Story* appear in Mee 1998; his *Bacchae* and *Big Love* are available online, at <http://www.panix.com/~mcejr>.

⁴ See Foley 1999 and 2000; more generally, McDonald 1992, Harrigan 1995, Patsalidis and Sakellariou 1999, and numerous conferences on modern productions, including the one organized by John Gilbert on *Tantalus* held at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, October 2000.

—KITSCH-
but not too
much

Own Me," using champagne flutes and empty bottles as microphones, like TV roommates really letting their hair down.

The asylum seekers include Thyona, an antimale feminist ("Every

boy baby should be flushed down the toilet," and—in a twist on Aristotle

and Freud—"The male is a biological accident, an incomplete female"),

who is not happy about it; the heroine Lydia, a thoughtful and confused

Hypermetra; and the "I'm comfortable with my sexuality," bimbonic

Olympia (at one point even Lydia has enough: "Olympia, you're a wit").

Mee makes them young Greek women fleeing arranged marriages with

their Greek-American cousins, who—having made it in the new world—

arrive by attack helicopter to bring their brides back to the altar ("Don't

you watch television? Don't you see what happens when Americans

want something?"). Punctuating the theatrical high jinks are moments of

ethical doubt, efforts at human connection (especially the exchange be-

tween the shy Nikos, wonderfully played by Bruce McKenzie, and the

object of his desire, Lydia), and big dollops of sentiment.

There's the rub. For all the feminist rhetoric, Mee's women seem

adolescent, and their resistance remains, finally, a comic trope. None of

these women consider marriage per se as an obstacle. They fail to enter-

tain serious alternatives; they have no careers, passionate interests, unful-

filled ambitions, intellectual pursuits (Leslie Gore is about their speed).

Viewed on its own terms, *Big Love* takes the audience for an entertaining

drive down slippery-when-wet roads, but it drops off its passengers un-

changed, except for the feeling that tragic plots are like demolition der-

bies in which even wrecked Rolls Royces can drive off into the sunset.

As to where Mee chauffeurs those of us familiar with and inter-

Aeschylus, to the cleaners, like the wardrobe mistress responsible for the

cake- and blood-coated costumes that follow the hilarious food-fight

murder scene. But is there anything else classicists can take away from

Mee's adaptation of Aeschylus' strange original? In what follows I shall

try to answer that question.

In updating and adapting older work, a writer looks for contempo-

rary situational and character correspondences with the original. I imag-

ine that a glimpse of such correspondences often provides the impetus

for such projects. An ancient play that deals with male domination,

female resistance, domestic violence, refugees, a high-profile trial, and a

love-conquers-all ending—"Well, heck," one hears the Hollywood pitch-

man, "that could be us, right now!" And Mee gleefully serves up a hybrid

domestic melodrama, catastrophe film, and coming-of-age comedy with

a feel-good ending, perfect for summer (PG 13). But surely such easy

is it truly a feel-good ending?
don't Lydia + Nikos leave? smellin' good?

-that we hear about back stories can always be created in a piece with such freedom to creativity

is she that shy?

3 different female archetypes

-Thyona's (line typo) and Valente Solanas

relevance is not sufficient to warrant a hard look at an old play. We expect something more, something foreign or new, to be brought forward from the past.

One way to determine what that might be is to look at the basic changes that the new version makes, highlighting what the adapter does with the older material (as when we compare Shakespeare with his sources). These mutations allow us to see more clearly changes in culture and convention that separate the original from its epigone. For example, in *Big Love*, Mee eliminates Danaos, absorbing his function within the women themselves (particularly Thyona), giving the feminist position its own voice rather than an echo of paternal authority. Similarly, the incest/impity issue that looms large in the Danaid's rejection of their cousins holds little terror for modern audiences, evidenced by the popularity of Louis Malle's *Le soufflé de coeur* and plays like Steven Berkoff's *Greek*, an updated Labdacid fable where the fully apprised "Oedy" can't wait to get back in the sack with his sexy mum.⁵ Fitting the money-is-no-problem, "international American" ambience of *Big Love*, Mee dismisses Danaos' essentialist views on appropriate mates, preferring the individualist man-tra of freedom of choice without coercion (regarding sexual practices, partners, husbands, whatever). After mythologizing his Ken-and-Barbie-doll collection, Piero's gay son Guiliano sings an updated "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered," indicating his love of being taken and dominated, while making clear that other adults are free to do whatever consensual thing they want. For most U.S. theater audiences (last year less than 3 percent of the American public went to live theater more than once), there is little controversial or enlightening in this view. In place of a potential clash between our culture and that of Aeschylus, out of which new insights might emerge, Mee offers us politically correct cliché.

More problematic is Mee's failure to grapple with the issue of race, which emerges several times in Aeschylus' original. There, the Egyptian pursuers and the Danaids themselves (although related to their Greek protectors) are racially different from Pelasgos and the Argives (Aesch. *Supp.* 277-90, 496-98, 719-20, 745). By making all parties (except Piero's sibyl-like mother Bella) "English-speaking international travelers," Mee avoids the refugee problem even as he invokes it. "You know," says Piero, "I'm not the Red Cross. . . . I can't take in every refugee who comes into my garden. . . . Why would I do this?"—to which Lydia responds,

⁵ Berkoff 1994. Cf. Voltaire's *Oedipe*, which downplays the incest in order to make Oedipus even more a sympathetic victim of evil gods. See Burian 1997, 246.

maybe race focus? wksn this

an important message that recurs frequently

female strength & agency

new not son

"Because it's right. . . . Because we are here." Lydia has a point, but she and her fellow asylum-seekers happen to be attractive young women who fit seamlessly into their new home (they simply appropriate Piero's bathtub). Mee fails to explore a potential—and troubling—correspondence between Aeschylus' world and our own, namely the racism that underlies refugee policies in the United States and elsewhere.⁶

Of course, a playwright is under no compulsion to deal with such realities, but Aeschylus' original (with its "black Egyptians") suggests the possibility. However, Mee's dramatic world (here as in his other adaptations) prefers high-end cosmetics and designer fashion over desperate humans of the wrong color, ethnic provenance, or political persuasion.

The women in *Big Love* deserve asylum in the same way they feel entitled to the best in skin care. Says Olympia, emerging from Piero's bathtub, "I don't want to complain / but you don't seem to have a lot of products / . . . / Soaps, you know, and creams . . . things to make a woman feel fresh Estee Lauder 24 Karat Color Golden Body Creme with Sunbloc." In his earlier *Orestes*, Mee has Helen appear "in a canary yellow Chanel suit" while describing her epidermal regimen: "First of all, I cleanse my skin with products that cleanse but don't dry. . . . I exfoliate my face once a week with a product that contains oatmeal, honey, and nuts. The toner I use is alcohol-free, and I moisturize all the time and use eye cream." In *The Trojan Women a Love Story*, Hecuba "wears a silk Yves Saint Laurent that has been torn," while Helen sports "a chemise, and nothing else, from Victoria's Secret." Mee's adapted tragic characters read *People* magazine and *USA Today* for the big picture while seeking shopping guidance from *The New Yorker*, *Elle*, and *Yachting Monthly*.

Although great fun, I can't help feeling that Mee turns Aeschylus into a chocolate for the knowing bourgeoisie of the body-soak, deck-chair variety, happy to consume culture that is wacky, well-pedigreed, and watered down. The genuine dilemma posed by *Supplices* becomes an occasion to laugh at our pretensions about such a dilemma, without ever having to take it seriously. Returning to our satyr play comparison, in the

Haitians (mostly black) were intercepted by the U.S. Coast Guard as they fled from a brutal military dictatorship (Baby Doc Duvalier, the military junta) armed and aided by the United States. Only 11 were granted political asylum, the rest sent home to suffer political repression, imprisonment, torture, and worse. In the same period, 75,000 Cubans were picked up by the U.S. Coast Guard, and every one was granted asylum, along with public funds to achieve permanent resident status and eventual citizenship.

there is -
time
where it
resorts to comedy
when certain weight
of meaning is
lost.

also its
being written
for a modern
audience

-some truth
to this
statement,
but that might
change the
focus
greatly

ancient theater each paratragic send-up had three previous tragedies against which to work; *Big Love* has only itself, which makes it resemble escapist theater pure and simple.

But the play does have something to say, and Mee gestures toward larger claims and deeper thoughts. After the suitors' *deus-like* arrival (signaled by helicopter noise and blasts of air that drown out Lydia's conciliatory words), Thyona's fiancé and alter ego, Constantine, delivers some right-wing, militaristic metaphysics:

You say, you don't want to be taken against your will.
People are taken against their will every day.
Do you want tomorrow to come?
Do you want to live in the future?
Never mind. You can't stop the clock...
Time itself is an act of rape.
Life is rape...
We are all taken by force, all the time.

We see through the sophistry, because Constantine conflates what lies within human control with what lies beyond it. Later, however, in the play's most significant speech, Constantine describes the male violence that society requires and then tries to deny:

When push comes to shove
and people need defending
then no one wants a good guy any more...
[But] when this impulse isn't called for any longer
a man is expected to put it away
carry on with life
as though he didn't have such impulses...
and so it may be that when a man turns this violence on a woman...
he should be esteemed for this
for informing her
about what it is that civilization really contains
the impulse to hurt side by side with the gentleness...
because to know this pain
is to know the whole of life...
and not just some pretty piece of it.

Male violence reveals the truth buried under the myth of civilization that permeates the upper-class world of the play. Humans are really brutes, and the proof is the fact that we need (and reward) brutishness in our ongoing fight to civilize other brutes. Denouncing Lydia for falling in

the in
Ancient Greece
- the now

Mee does
much more
than gesture,
he spells
it out
clearly.

love and sparing her husband, Thyona takes up the argument of the man she has recently killed: "You break your promise. . . . In any civilized society / you would be put on trial / And hanged probably. / Or electrocuted." For Thyona, the imperatives of justice demand "[leaving] not one stone standing on another [until] a lesson has been learned." She echoes General Curtis Lemay, secretary of the U.S. Air Force under Lyndon Johnson (and George Wallace's vice presidential running mate in 1968), who promised to bomb Hanoi back to the Stone Age, until no two bricks were stuck together. Given the mood and dramatic context, however, Mee's irony does not make us think or protest; it simply makes us laugh. After all, Thyona and the others should be on trial for murder, not Lydia for "betraying" her sisters. But when you're ready to link feminist excess to the carnage of the Vietnam War (over 2 million Vietnamese were killed in the U.S. invasion and occupation), is Rush Limbaugh far behind? The play's response to these convolutions lies in its capacious title, which Lydia puzzles out:

When you love someone
it's too late to set conditions.
You can't say
I'll love you if you do this
or I'll love you if you change that.
. . . because true love has no conditions.

Not surprisingly, the self-appointed judge of Lydia's trial, the mother goddess Bella, finds for the defendant—"Love trumps all"—even as she welcomes those who have murdered their husbands into her extended family. Both Lydia's romantic love (that conquers all) and Bella's maternal love (that embraces all contradictions) operate at a mythic level far beyond anything the Greeks concocted. For all the deeply rooted myths underlying Aeschylus' original (Zeus, Hera, Io, Aphrodite, the Danaids), its world remains real and intractable. If we look deeply into Mee's *Big Love*, we find our own homegrown megamyth that should be retired—"Love means never having to say you're sorry." Erich Segal, meet Charles Mee.

When we're first introduced to Bella, she is sorting tomatoes and comparing them to her thirteen sons. Those that make the grade get a place on the table, while the rejects go "spat" on the floor, foreshadowing the fatal climax when wasted food and wasted lives conjoin. Tomatoes have their own place in the theater, launched by unhappy audiences when the show fails to please. As should be clear, *Big Love* has nothing to fear on that score. Mee fails to confront the issues raised by Aeschylus'

-symbolic
-sympathy
ending

-it has the
power to
do more than
just that

original, preferring to scatter the stage with theatrical corpses while Lydia throws her bouquet into the audience. Nevertheless, we extend Bella's judgment of her show-business son to the author of *Big Love*.

My eleventh son

he is on television

on a soap opera

with the stories of love affairs

and godknows whatnot . . .

[she starts to drop another tomato to the ground, thinks better of it, puts

it on the table]

At least he's not killing people.

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