

Supernatural Wife

Anne Carson and Big Dance Theater Make Euripides Move

by Cassandra Csencsitz

All too often, the fate of Greece's drama can look as bleak as their debt. Eternally at pains to sell their tragedies on the theater market, anyone who cares has to ask: What do the Greek plays have to say to us today? How do you produce them to resonant effect? And are we wrong to apply entertainment's likability paradigm to art?

The Lion King's ad touts, "The perfect marriage of entertainment and art!" revealing the common view that they are mutually exclusive. The truth is, especially in this country, they often are. Whether we have dumbed down culture or the other way around, Generations Boomer to Z expect all-consuming distraction from the stage and screen, and we don't like unhappy or incomplete endings.

How to pique and sustain modern audiences' interest in Greek tragedy is puzzling to theater-makers who love the stuff. There is no better team working on making the Greeks "accessible and surprising" than superstar poet-classicist-translator Anne Carson and genre-bending veteran theater company Big Dance Theater, helmed by Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar. Bringing their second re-creation of a Carson Greek to BAM November 29–December 3, they have renamed their mixed-media makeover of Euripides's *Alkestis* to *Supernatural Wife*, in a marketing move approved by Carson.

According to Lazar, "You alienate so many potential audience members just with a Greek or foreign-sounding name." Carson comments, "Making a Greek tragedy work is largely a problem of making it *move*—on the stage and in the mind. Annie-B and Paul *get* this. They are both innovative and rigorous, a combination rare nowadays." On her use of idiom in translation, Carson explains, "I use it in an attempt to keep the surface moving fast. Audiences have brief attention spans nowadays."

The audience attention span is an issue art-makers beyond the theater are concerned with, as Manohla Dargis and A. O. Scott expressed in their June 3, 2011 piece for the *New York Times*, "In Defense of Slow and Boring," a diatribe against the "anti-art" bias in the movie business and an apologia to movies that encourage reflection. With drama or "straight theater's" capacity to be "slower" than anything on the small or silver screen, and the Greeks the slowest of that category, the word "boring" can come to mind all too easily, making for a tough P.R. job.

But it doesn't have to be that way, nor was it in Greece's heyday, some 2,500 years ago, when you couldn't get a spot in Epidaurus's 17,000-seat theater, and the plays were filled with song, dance, and oblique commentary on verboten topics. With *Supernatural Wife*, as with *Orestes*—Big Dance's first Carson collaboration at Classic Stage Company in 2009, and the funniest Greek tragedy I've ever seen—the adaptation drills into the bedrock of the play to find its rock n'roll spirit—something that, as David Byrne's choreographer, Parson is uniquely suited to do—and "reveals the cellular life of Euripides's play," according to their artistic statement.

Lazar and Parson's X-ray vision is perhaps at its most clear in their handling of the choral odes. Anyone who has ever seen or acted in a traditional rendering of Greek tragedy knows that the chorus's scenes tend to leave one feeling like they should be on Ritalin. Without ever undermining due gravitas, Big Dance takes the opportunity to mesmerize the audience with Cathedral-invoking odes, striking just the right note of sobriety with celestial overtones to put you in the mood for the bizarre story about to unfold—in just under 70 carefully wrought minutes.

I first spoke with Annie-B and Paul Lazar about what would become *Supernatural Wife* more than 2 1/2 years ago in the project's embryonic stages. Inclined toward work that baffles or frightens them, they recognized *Alkestis* as a perfect choice. According to Carson "*Alkestis* is a completely unique play—subversive and unclassifiable even in its own day: Comedy? Tragicomedy? Satire? Farce? Its energy goes all over the place in funny, spooky ways, like Alfred Hitchcock."

The plot centers on a king who is fated to an early death and gets the opportunity to send someone to Hades in his place. He canvasses family (including elderly parents), friends,



Supernatural Wife by Big Dance Theater. Photos by Mike Van Sleen.



and subjects to no avail. In the end only his wife, Alkestis, the mother of his two children, agrees. In the wrong hands it would be impossible to suspend your disbelief. But with Carson's straight-shooting translation and Big Dance's perfectly paced production, it is successfully "seemingly real"—a triumph of Greek verisimilitude.

In their work on *Alkestis*, Carson and Lazar have sought to "restore dancing to its rightful place in Greek drama" while "sourcing and rethinking the pulsing, profound nature of dance and music in tragedy." Lazar elaborates on "the visceral pull of music," making it an able conduit of the emotionality straight productions lack, while also keeping the momentum going.

Much like Euripides, the Big Dance trademark hovers between forms with a self-described "freewheeling mix of theater, music, dance, and video." For *Supernatural Wife*—their 19th production—they drew on melodrama from the Yiddish theater to the fast-talking and heightened style of Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* to find the right tone for the piece. Their Obie for "its passionate practice of the most implausible choreographic and literary concoctions" is exercised throughout the play. In one particularly exquisite moment Alkestis dances before a blown-up Greta Garbo screen test invoking layers of meaning: A mythological character from ancient times collides with an early 20th century icon as we look on—the centuries evaporate.

Debuting their last two creations in France, where experimental waters are warmer, the artistic affinity is mutual—the French audiences love what Big Dance does, and the Big Dance family is deeply appreciative of a country where rehearsal spaces are nicer than the boardrooms, and an unknown play with no celebrity presence can bring in a full audience.

Imagine. In symptomatic contrast we find Big Dance back in New York, hard at work in a popular downtown rehearsal space under Wall Street. The artists are relegated to catacombs while folks who could buy Greece enjoy luxury conditions above.

But they have to rehearse somewhere. With a developmental process that involves a year of gestation, playful and experimental in the extreme, during which they kill countless darlings after test-runs before audiences of friends reveal the weak spots, their audience-mindful approach may just be the secret to their success—the hubris of the artist put aside to fulfill the job of the entertainer. In the resulting poem-tight productions, every word, prop, bit of stage business feels inevitable.

What Big Dance seems to "get" is that audiences' slow-phobia is valid as often as not. An excellent essay on the issue, "The Tyranny of the Text," appeared in the Fall 2009 issue of *Arion* (of which Carson is a board member) after a painfully enigmatic revival of *The Bacchae* failed to transport author Peter Meineck: "It seems endemic in the performance culture of the United States to approach Greek Drama as something completely alien, overly ritualistic, and more often than not, totally incomprehensible." He describes the opening scene, "Then came the actors walking that walk. You know the walk I mean...that slow, ponderous, acutely self-absorbed and above all *serious* walk."

Alkestis is published in a quartet of Carson's Euripides's translations called *Grief Lessons*. The title of her anthology may give us part of the translator's answer to what the Greeks want to speak to us about. Life being short, and not so sweet, for the ancients left them somewhat preoccupied by the biological feat of life itself. Nowhere is this more directly and profoundly examined than *Alkestis*. See Admetos and his father, Pheres,

who, having refused to die for his son, has been written off by him, in a scene that is equally uproarious and somber:

PHERES

I gave you birth, I reared you up as master of this house. I did not contract to die for you...Don't bother dying on my behalf and I won't die on yours!...You love your life. So do we all—if that bothers you, eat it.

ADMETOS

A young man's death, an old man's death, same thing?

PHERES

We each get one life to live, not two.

ADMETOS

May your one life last longer than Zeus's.

PHERES

You curse your own father?

ADMETOS

I curse your greed for life.

PHERES

I love this light of God, I do.

ADMETOS

You will be infamous after your death.

PHERES

If I'm dead I won't care.

Rich with weak clichés and devastating truisms about the fear of death, waiting for death, death itself, and grief, *Alkestis* is quintessential Euripides, notorious—according to Carson—for “jarring tragic and comic effects against one another, as if they belonged to the same convention.”

Alkestis, in contrast with her father-in-law, is indifferent toward her self-sacrifice. Although pained to leave her children she is unafraid of death, and candid about her legacy. “The dead mean nothing,” she says, a strange statement coming from a Greek, typically obsessed with their good name after death. Herakles later tells her widower Admetos, “To love the dead is endless tears.”

So what is the Greeks' grief lesson? Anyone who has ever lost knows one of the most painful parts of mourning is the guilt you feel when getting back to business as usual. Might being more honest and realistic about the pull of life, and privilege of the living, make grief easier to bear? Might engaging in tragic storylines—in the theater or in the news—intensify the feeling of life, by taking us to Hades *and back*, to positive effect? As Carson points out in her preface, “In crisis their souls are visible.” In this era of great angst, hopes on hold, where vocation triumphs over inspiration, the Greeks give us life's big moments, loaning us godlike perspective for an hour or two, and hopefully lodging a sliver of it permanently in our worldview. In crisis we have no room for self-pity or petty complaints. By only ever showing us their heroes at

“boiling point,” the Greeks enable us to look on death bare, and remember that we are alive.

As for the possibility of making entertainment more artful—it's kind of like the way we have to look at our national diet: You won't get the fast food nation eating kale overnight. But with better ingredients both the brain candy and its consumer will, little by little, improve.

Euripides only won second place when *Alkestis* debuted in 438 B.C.E., toward the end of the generation-swallowing Peloponnesian War. I personally think with the help of Big Dance, he might have earned the gold. But see for yourself at BAM, and give the Greeks a chance.

ALKESTIS:

I washed my white skin in river water,
took out garments from the cedar closet
and dressed myself beautifully.
Then I stood before the hearth and prayed.



Big Dance Theater's *Supernatural Wife*, based on *Alkestis* by Euripides, translated by Anne Carson, directed and choreographed by Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson runs November 29–December 3 at BAM's Harvey Theater (651 Fulton Street, Brooklyn). Tickets: \$20, \$35, \$50 at www.BAM.org or 718-636-4100.

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CASSANDRA CSENCSTZ is a New York City-based arts and beauty writer.



Photo: Exhibition of “The Freud Drawings” by Robert Longo at Metro Pictures Gallery, 2001