"Iphigenia" challenges gender roles, poses timeless questions

By Shelly Gustafson
Assistant A&E Editor

The UPS theatre department kicked off their 2003/2004 season this past weekend with the Greek epic “Iphigenia at Aulis” by Euripides. The show will also be shown this weekend starting Friday Oct. 31 and through Saturday Nov. 1 at 7:30 as well as a matinee performance at 2 p.m. on Nov. 1.

“Iphigenia at Aulis” attacks the audience’s preconceived beliefs of gender roles, war, and even family. Euripides is able to raise questions in this play (which was first produced in 405 B.C.E.) that are still being raised around the world to this day.

The UPS production is directed by Jac Royce and utilizes the new translation of the original piece by Mary Kay Gamel. The director’s notes state that, “We present his [Euripides'] play nearly 2500 years later, to ask whether we have learned these lessons yet.”

Royce comments that when she asked Gamel for permission to use her translation, she said “Just don’t let Agamemnon off the hook.” This simple comment speaks volumes about Gamel’s translation where she is much less forgiving of the central male figure of the play, Agamemnon who struggles throughout the piece on how he should handle his current situation involving his daughter.

In Royce’s words, “He could listen to the women over whom he has the power of life and death, and for the first time in his life, choose humanity,” or he could choose what is presented as the coward’s way out.

Other central characters include the heroine Iphigenia and her mother Clytemnestra, who, while both are shown as strong in their own ways, are severely regulated by their society and thus have virtually no power over their own lives.

The costumes for this production add a much needed ambiance and epic feel to the production, which otherwise may be a little lost. These included colorful and elaborate clothing for the females and stunning armor and shoes for the males. The set, while simple, transforms Norton Clapp Theatre to a point that’s hardly recognizable and is utilized to its fullest potential by the directing. Also notable is the amazing use of dramatic lighting particularly during the final powerful scenes.

One questionable choice, however, is the use of sarcastic language and body language to get across certain points, particularly those involving the gender issues inherent in the play. In many ways, these dramatic pauses deter from the powerful words and story in the play and don’t allow the audience to come to their own realizations before having them waved in front of their face as comedy. In other words, the story itself is powerful enough that it doesn’t require the cast’s added push to get its points across.

“Iphigenia at Aulis” is a powerful piece that raises a number of issues we are facing today in reference to war. While the production isn’t perfect, it’s still an interesting and provocative story for this holiday weekend. “Iphigenia” is performed in Norton Clapp Theatre and tickets are $7 for students and $11 for general admission. Tickets for the remaining performances can be purchased at the info. center or at the door.

*Shelly is a returning writer and avid theatre attendant.