UC SANTA BARBARA

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A Helen for Our Times

Poor Helen of Troy. Despite being the immortal child of gods and the most beautiful woman in the world, she's often seen as a passive victim for whom a thousand ships set sail to the doom of untold Greeks and Trojans. Evdokimos Tsolakidis, however, will have none of it.

The Greek actor, director and playwright thinks Homer shortchanged her. He prefers the title character in Euripides's "Helen" — a bold, smart woman. "It's a very feminist play," Tsolakidis said. "Helen is not just beautiful, like a piece of furniture; she's clever, and she's more clever than (her husband) Menelaus. Menelaus is just a jerk."

Tsolakidis would know. A guest artist of UC Santa Barbara's Department of Theater and Dance, he is directing student productions of "Helen" Friday, July 29, and Saturday, July 30, at the UCSB Theater and Dance Studio Theater. Both performances, which are free and open to the public, are at 7:30 p.m.

" 'Helen' is a play that I love for many reasons," he said. "It is the most, in my opinion, anti-war play ever written."

It's also quite a bit different than "The Iliad." In Euripides's play, Helen is taken to Egypt, where the king wants to marry her. The Helen in Troy is merely a phantom — making the Trojan War a tragic mistake.

"Mr. Tsolakidis wants to look at the misconceptions that breed war and follow the journey of the alternative Helen that unfolds in Euripides's play," said Michael

Morgan, a lecturer in theater and dance. “While ‘Helen’ is, of course, an ancient play, Mr. Tsolakidis is keen on making it accessible to a contemporary audience with the relevance of its enduring anti-war theme.”

“Helen,” which was made possible thanks to the Argyropoulos Endowment in Hellenic Studies, has a strong modern resonance, noted Helen Morales, who holds the Argyropoulos Chair in Hellenic Studies and is a professor of classics at UCSB. “Can we trust a president’s motives for starting a war?” she said. “How do we know when a war is real and when it has been staged? These are some of the questions that Euripides’s darkly comic tragedy poses.”

A 30-year veteran of the theater in multiple roles and positions, Tsolakidis is founder and artistic director of the Theater of Changes in Athens, which boasts a vibrant theater scene despite Greece’s economic troubles. Indeed, hard times seem to be driving Greeks to productions big and small. “We love theater,” he said, noting there were 1,600 productions in the city this year. “Theaters are full, and especially this last year. You feel that you really want to do something in the evening and have some fun. Even if you’re a poor guy and you don’t have much money, you can save 10 euros to go to a show and have some fun. People need that; it’s our job and we love it.”

Tsolakidis will discuss the state of theater in Greece today, how the arts can thrive during economic crisis and the differences between theater in Greece and in the U.S. on Sunday, July 24, from 2:30 to 3:30 p.m. at Karpeles Manuscript Library, 21 W. Anapamu St. in Santa Barbara. The event is free and open to the public.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.