



Myth Of Tragic Love Is Explored In Inaugural Theater Production And Exhibition At The Getty Villa

By Adrienne Papp



EURIPIDES' TIMELESS TRAGEDY HIPPOLYTOS PREMIERED AT THE GETTY VILLA'S BARBARA AND LAWRENCE FLEISCHMAN THEATER ON SEPTEMBER 7TH. THE ACCOMPANYING EXHIBITION, ENDURING MYTH: THE TRAGEDY OF HIPPOLYTOS & PHAIDRA WILL BE ON VIEW UNTIL DECEMBER 4,

2006. THE EXHIBITION OFFERS A FASCINATING JOURNEY THROUGH ART AND CULTURE AND EXAMINE THE ENDURING POWER OF A MYTH THAT HAS INSPIRED THE LIKES OF 17TH-CENTURY DRAMATISTS AND POETS, 19TH-CENTURY ARTISTS, AND 20TH-CENTURY FILMMAKERS.

Aristotle and Sophocles called Euripides the most tragic of the poets, and his myths' underlying themes, miscommunication between genders and generations, as well as religious fundamentalism, still strike a chord with modern audiences.

The myth of the exhibit revolves around Hippolytos, son of the Athenian king Theseus, who is devoted to Artemis, virgin goddess of the hunt. Jealous of his love, Aphrodite drives Hippolytos' stepmother Phaidra to fall desperately in love with him. Phaidra grows sick, consumed by forbidden passion. Rejected by Hippolytos and fearing that he will ruin her reputation, Phaidra commits suicide and leaves a note accusing Hippolytos of rape. Hippolytos is eventually banished by his father, Theseus.

The story brings to light multiple human struggles. Phaidra's struggle against her God-driven passion and her subsequent suicide is a mortal attempt to transcend a structure of divine

retribution. Hippolytos' act of forgiving Theseus has been read as a human act, a choice made for the first time in full knowledge of the nature of human life and divine government. It highlights humankind's tragic condition. Hippolytos' forgiveness of his father becomes an affirmation of purely human values in an inhuman universe.

The ability of the myth's characters to make their own moral choices makes Hippolytos especially accessible to a contemporary audience. The arbitrary power of the gods, the free will of mortals, the consequences of thought and speech, and the contrast of physical passion and moral restraint are themes of Euripides' Hippolytos that have continued to attract audiences and artists from antiquity to the present.

How do the struggles and human needs dramatized in a play written more than 2,000 years ago continue to be immediate and alive to modern audiences? According to director Stephen Sachs, the answer is simple.

"Just as man is a fragile balance of body and spirit, the holy and the unhealthy, the sensual and the spiritual, the erotic and the eternal, desire and the divine, the precarious relationship between man and god is brought vividly to life in Hippolytos," he says.

The ongoing exhibition will demonstrate how the ancient Greek play's themes of passion, mortality, and the frailties of human conviction were adapted and interpreted in different periods in art, film, and on stage.

In the final analysis, Hippolytos is an enduring human drama and a must see exhibition. Among the VIP visitors at the opening night were Tom Hanks, Rita Wilson, and other Hollywood celebrities.

Above left: The night view of outdoor classic theater as the Getty Villa, Photography by Richard Ross, ©J. Paul Getty Trust

Above L-R: Death of Hippolytos, 1800, by Carle Vernet. Courtesy of J. Paul Getty Museum

Below: Morlan Higgins as Theseus (top), and Paul Moore as Hippolytos in a scene from Euripides' *Hippolytos* at the Getty Villa. Photography by Craig Mathew. ©J. Paul Getty Trust

