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## Of nihilism, comedy and epic theater in *Aulis*

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*Matthew Hannon is Agamemnon in Christopher Chen's Aulis: An Act of Nihilism in One Long Act, a production of U.C. Berkeley's Theater Dance & Performance Studies Department directed by Mina Morita. Below: Samuel Avishay as Achilles gets deep into combat. Photos by Adam Tolbert*

Award-winning San Francisco playwright **Christopher Chen** gets deep into existential nihilism in his latest world premiere, *Aulis: An Act of Nihilism in One Long Act*. That title pretty much says it all: Chen takes the premise of **Euripides'** *Iphigenia at Aulis* and gives it a contemporary spin that allows for abundant comedy yet still leads to a bloody, ultimately futile end.

Chen's epic one-act receives a spiffy production from U.C. Berkeley's Theater Dance & Performance Studies Department, which seems appropriate as Chen is a Cal alum and began his playwriting career there. The really good news is that there's nothing about this production that would indicate it's a student production (not that there's anything wrong with a student production, especially a university, duh). Credit director **Mina Morita** and her team of extraordinary designers and actors for giving Chen's play the life and flash and impact it requires.

Entering Zellerbach Playhouse, the audience finds the play has already begun, with the Greek soldiers and their 100,000 ships stranded in Aulis due to lack of winds. The soldiers are on the Aulis beachhead trying to keep themselves occupied. Some are watching animé on seven battered TVs in one part of the sand-covered set (design by **Martin Flynn**). Others are in front of another screen playing the video game "God of War." Still others are engaging in intense mock battles involving roshambo with actual swords and fists. These soldiers, all pumped and ready to kick some Trojan

keister and exact revenge for Paris' theft of the lovely Helen, wife of Menelaus. But without wind, their ships are stuck, and a prophecy has come down that in order to get the winds to blow, their leader, Agamemnon (brother of Menelaus) must sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia.



All of this storytelling is quickly dispatched as Agamemnon, who does and doesn't want to murder his daughter, awaits the arrival of his wife, Clytemnestra, and Iphigenia. In this enforced delay, where boredom, restlessness and bad decision making abound, Agamemnon is losing sight of pretty much everything: why are they fighting? why are they stuck? why does life seem so meaningless?

Chen's spin on this ancient tale crackles with modern humor, especially in the character of Agamemnon, expertly played by **Matthew Hannon**, who has the ability to play the comedy and satire and, as they play demands it, provide a deeper, darker take on commander losing his drive and a father weighing his own broken heart against the welfare of his troops. It's no accident that Chen originally wrote *Aulis* during the Bush era, when wartime decision making seemed dubious at best. This 90-minute play overflows with the absurdity of war, and director Morita and her 14-member cast tread delicately on that ever-shifting line between barbed comedy and complex, human drama.

That's why this handsome production feels less like a student production and more like something you'd see on the main stage of a sturdy regional theater. In addition to Flynn's sandy set (which, if you watch closely, begins shrinking as the drama intensifies), the lighting by **Jim French** lends an operatic feel to the proceedings, creating gorgeous stage pictures with the set and with **Erik Scanlon's** projection designs. The costumes by **Ashley Rogers** also play that line between serious and comic, with some seriously beautiful images coming through (especially with the arrival of Iphigenia and company). **Hannah Birch Carl** has crafted a magisterial sound design but with comic touches – the music (and the lights) keep cutting out at inopportune times, leaving the actors to look befuddled until the production gets back on track. No matter how many times it happens, it's always good for a laugh.

There are several kick-ass fights, courtesy of fight director **Dave Maier**, and the high-energy cast really goes for it. The sand flies and the clanging swords ring. Perhaps there is one way you can tell this is a student production, and that's the incredible enthusiasm the actors show for the work they're doing. From the soldiers in the ensemble to the leads, these performances have a gusto and finesse you don't often find in Greek drama.

In addition to Hannon's excellent Agamemnon, we get a wonderfully bizarre Achilles courtesy of **Samuel Avishay** (and his henchperson Polly played by **Eleanor White**) and a strong Clytemnestra (**Annie Fei**) and even stronger Iphigenia (**Veronica Maynez**). In supporting roles, **Eddie Benzoni** is a droll assistant to Agamemnon, but no one has more gum-chewing sass than **Morgan Steele** as Iphigenia's maid, Grace.

If you have to be stuck in Aulis with anyone, this is the crew you want. Nihilism has rarely been so enjoyable.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Christopher Chen's *Aulis: An Act of Nihilism in One Long Act* continues through March 15 at the Zellerbach Playhouse on the UC Berkeley campus. Tickets are \$13-\$20. Visit [tdps.berkeley.edu](http://tdps.berkeley.edu).

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