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Not for nothing, but have you seen the size of that freakin' *tree* that fell in Rock Island's Lincoln Park over the weekend?

For those who don't know, this granddaddy of a tree, which previously stood near the Greek columns of Genesius Guild's outdoor stage, was uprooted during Friday night's storm, just missing the organization's light and sound booth, and crashing directly on top of the park's stage-left risers. Considering the dimensions of the thing - the trunk is almost six feet wide, for Pete's sake! - it's really a sight to see (if it's still there by the time you read this). And it's to Genesius Guild's credit that, thanks to director Michael King's production of *Hecuba*, it's currently only the park's
second-
most transfixing sight.

Euripides' classical drama, which concerns the titular former queen's enslavement after the Greeks' conquering of Troy, is a powerful meditation on the brutality of war combined with a horrific (yet intensely satisfying) tale of vengeance, and should be required viewing for those fortunate enough to have attended the Prenzie Players' recent staging of its precursor, *The Trojan Women*
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Hecuba
, though, is like
The Trojan Women
's presentational, mask-wearing cousin - less harrowing, to be sure, but graced with a similar

emotional directness, and with the added, occasional benefit of being funny, or at least as funny as Greek tragedy gets. (The laughs here don't stem from jokes, but from your giggly anticipation at witnessing Hecuba - after suffering so much unspeakable anguish - exacting some deserved revenge.)

There are those, of course, who might spend an inordinate amount of time chuckling *at* the production; if *Hecuba* is your first exposure to the Guild's annual employment of period masks, the stylistic device does take some getting used to. Yet while we miss out on the nuance that fully visible performers can bring to a part, the masks do force you to pay stricter attention to the play's language and themes, and the actors, while hidden, are hardly buried - even when characters aren't speaking, and are all but motionless, you can still pick up on subtle changes in emotion through the tiniest of head movements and shifts in bearing. When someone is really on a roll, as *Hecuba*'s masked cast members are throughout the show's 70-plus minutes, you can stare at her or him for an entire, lengthy soliloquy and completely forget that you're gazing into an inanimate face; the actors do the vocalizing, and your imagination provides the expressions.

The masks also have an additional benefit, in that they allow for the casting of performers who might otherwise have been considered too young for their roles, and it would've been everyone's loss if youth kept Kady Patterson from assuming the role of Hecuba. Having only seen (to my recollection) Patterson on stage once before - playing the ingénue, and her twin sister, in last summer's Richmond Hill Barn Theatre comedy *Dearly Beloved* - I was more than a little blown away by her vocal power and physical assurance on Sunday night; Patterson's wailing laments and vociferous accusations were achingly felt, and she pulled off remarkable feats of voiceless acting, as when she cradled the body (or rather, the *mask*) of her fallen son and dolefully carried him offstage.

It's a divine performance - Patterson even shows off her comic chops when Hecuba attends to a murder and delivers a deliciously nasty take to the audience - and it's hardly *Hecuba*'s only one. Eric Lohmeier enacts a majestically imposing Odysseus, earning a gasp when he suddenly grabs Hecuba and throws her violently to the ground, and Anna Tunnicliff and Doug Adkins are greatly affecting as, respectively, the doomed daughter Polyxena and the grief-stricken herald Talthybius. Bryan Woods' Polymestor is more than sufficiently hateful; the actor's robustly voiced odiousness as the killer of Hecuba's son makes the play's final 15 minutes truly sail. And Eddie Staver III is in excellent vocal and physical command as a stalwart and unexpectedly empathetic Agamemnon. Given his sterling interpretive gifts, it's a pleasure to see Staver finally

make his way to Genesius Guild (and vice versa).

King does exceptional work with a cast that includes Kristen Raccone as a deceased messenger and Kate Farence (mask-less) as a pained handmaid, and he reserves his absolute finest work for the handling of *Hecuba*'s (similarly unmasked) Greek chorus. Orchestrating the women's conversation and individual retorts with urgency and drive, King gives their lines dramatic momentum even when they're standing still; in the scene in which the chorus decries the wretchedness of Helen of Troy, their collective anger begins with four voices, then grows to eight, and finally climaxes with all 12 damning Helen in thrilling unison.

Led by a passionately vibrant Ann Miller as the Choragos, they're a spectacular ensemble wonderfully well-directed, and *Hecuba* earns personal bonus points for allowing me the first chance I've had to publicly praise Miller, with whom I appeared in a college production 22 years ago. In that play, she portrayed a young novice with Tourette's. Now she's the voice of Greek tragedy. Talk about *range*.

For information, visit Genesius.org .