

Theatre Talk



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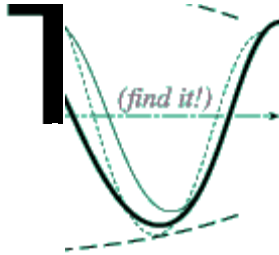
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show for
Thursday, May 26,
2005
Memorial Day
Theater  [\[Listen\]](#)



Memorial Day Theater

This is James Taylor with *Theatre Talk*.

Long hours in a dark theater may not be most people's idea of how to spend their Memorial Day weekend--but perhaps it should be. Memorial Day is, after all, about pausing to remember those who have fallen in battle, and theater has a long history of making audiences do just that.

Aeschylus, the father of Western Drama, was himself a veteran of multiple wars; but in his plays he chose not to recreate battles on stage, but rather to show how man reacts to the results of warfare.

Twenty-five hundred years later, even with great advances in stagecraft, theater remains a place where battles are better fought off stage. Literature and cinema are better mediums for close-up looks at actual combat; but the theater, due to its public nature, remains the best forum for artistic works that contemplate the effects of war.

Two productions closing this weekend in Los Angeles highlight this ability, which literally brings the audience into the same space as participants of past American struggles.



Mourning Becomes Electra
A Noise Within
Photo courtesy of Craig Schwartz

Mourning Becomes Electra, currently being staged by [A Noise Within](#), is perhaps the most classical work of drama written for the American Stage. Eugene O'Neill's expansive work takes the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus--a trilogy of

plays dealing with the aftermath of the Trojan War--and updates it to post-Civil War America (which was sort of the 1930's way of setting a classic in a suburban high school).

This work's greatness is made very clear by A Noise Within's powerful yet simple revival. William Dennis Hunt has Agamemnon-esque stature as Brigadier-General Ezra Mannon and the Clytemnestra and Electra roles are played with equal grandness by Deborah Strang and Libby West. The small theater lends an intimacy to



the work, while the set-- consisting mainly of empty portrait frames--economically portrays the grandeur of the Mannon family estate.



*Mourning Becomes Electra
A Noise Within
Photo courtesy of Craig Schwartz*

O'Neill's four-hour play is about the emotional scars of those who survive a war--and how those who appear to be the victors often must endure punishment worse than death. This idea is also addressed, albeit indirectly, in a work entitled *Agents*

and *Assets*, a play that takes place in the aftermath of a particular battle in the current War on Drugs.

Right now the Global War on Terror is stealing some of the War on Drugs' thunder, but this play--staged by the innovative troupe known as the [Los Angeles Poverty Department](#)--makes it clear that these two conflicts are closely related.



*Agents and Assets
Los Angeles Poverty Center*

Agents and Assets is a theatrical reenactment of a Congressional Hearing into the CIA's alleged involvement in cocaine trafficking during the late 1980's.

Besides a dramatic personae that has relevance today (Porter

Goss and Nancy Pelosi are but a few of the "characters" in this play), *Agents and Assets* also stars a cast that is made up entirely of homeless or formerly homeless actors.

Having the lawmakers played by people who have probably suffered from the policies enacted by the characters that they're portraying is a brilliant coup de theatre; but more striking are the words themselves, which are reportedly quoted verbatim from the congressional record. What these words make clear--regardless of who's speaking them--is that the failures of the War on Drugs (committed by multiple administrations of both parties) are woefully being repeated today in the War on Terror.



*Agents and Assets
Los Angeles Poverty Center*



Agents and Assets is directed

by John Malpede who is celebrating his 20th year as the guiding force behind the Los Angeles Poverty Department, a truly unique part of the Southern California theater scene. This production is as timely and rough as O'Neill's take on the Civil War is timeless and polished; but both works, while hardly the dramatic equivalent of beach reading, are worthy Memorial Day activities as they both display the power of real, live theater as well as the cost of real, live wars.

Agents and Assets will be performed once more this Sunday at [Compton Community College](#). (For tickets to *Angels and Agents*, call 213-413-1077.) *Mourning Becomes Electra* runs through this Sunday at the historic Masonic Temple Building in Glendale.

This is James Taylor with *Theatre Talk* for KCRW.

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