

# Electra-fying

Stanford Summer Theater festival explores potent Greek myth

by Daniela Reichelstein

Stanford Summer Theater's annual festival goes Greek this year, offering three stage productions and a film series that place the powerful Electra myth, about the tragic heroine who plots revenge for her father's murder, in both original and contemporary contexts.

The festival features three Electra plays; two stagings written by Euripides and Aeschylus translated by Stanford Summer Theater's artistic director, Rush Rehm, and a major production written by Sophocles, translated by MacArthur Award winner Anne Carson, as the festival's focal point.

The theater festival opens July 23 and runs through Aug. 15.

"The idea of the festival is to offer the public a range of views on the same powerful archetype," said Rehm, co-founder of Stanford Summer Theater and a professor of drama and classics at Stanford University.

Rehm chose Greek drama as the festival's theme for its anomalous focus on female heroines.

"I'm interested in the female figures in tragedy," he said. "All versions of Electra have demanding women roles where 50 percent of the lines are performed by the same actress. The emotional intensity of the part is equivalent to Shakespeare's King Lear."

Although attending Greek plays is a rare phenomenon for audiences today, people still identify with the ancient plots, according to Rehm.

"Our society is immersed unconsciously in the classics," he said. "Great writers in Africa, directors in Japan adopt Greek stories in their work. It's not cultural domination. It comes from an affinity for the story. These stories are in us."

The Electra myth contains basic themes that remain relevant in modern times.

"The play is continually timely," Rehm said. "It has primal human conflict between families and genders. It shows how society deals with evil and crime, with political justice."

"On a deeper level, it reflects the problem of memory and history and how they are connected to wrongdoing," Rehm said. "If I were a Palestinian, at what point do I forget when my family was exiled? Do I imbue my children with this memory?"

Electra herself embodies this notion of historical memory.

"The character of Electra is the vessel of memory in a world that wants everyone to forget," Rehm said. "She is the white, hot ember that holds on to the murder memory — it's her identity. She reminds us that this society discourages historical memory because people don't want to remember historical anger."

Rehm began work on the festival last October, rehearsing professional and student actors on and off

since March. Actors, however, were not the only artists required to bring Electra onstage.

"Greek tragedy encourages collaboration because of the choral element," Rehm said. "Built in is music, movement and song. This means you need a choreographer and a composer in addition to a director."

"The dance in Greek theater is not like dance in musical comedy," choreographer Aleta Hayes, a lecturer in drama at Stanford, said. "It's not a dance number. It doesn't illustrate what is being said. It instead supports the dramatic thrust of the play."

To produce the Sophocles play, Rehm reunited with Hayes, his former student, and composer Michael Keck. The three previously teamed up to stage "Deianeira," an adaptation of Sophocles' "Women of Trachis," in 2005. The production will contain original music, choreography, costumes and set design.

In addition to directing three dramatic versions of Electra, Rehm plans to show five films. Each film will be accompanied by a lecture by a Stanford faculty member.

The foreign films grapple with the myth but in a contemporary way, Rehm said.

"I was interested in great artists like Visconti," he said. "Not many theaters would show these old, foreign films."

The first film, "Iphigenia" (1977) by Michael Cacoyannis, is set in World War II Italy. Rehm chose an operatic version of the tale for the third film, "Elektra" (1982) by Gotz Friedrich, with music by Richard Strauss.



Valentina Conde plays the role of vengeful daughter Electra.

Clifford Pham

The series will end with Margarethe von Trotta's 1983 "Die bleierne Zeit" (or "The Leadern Time"). The film is a German response to World War II in which siblings Marianna and Juliana, who parallel the sisterly pair Electra and Chrysothemis, campaign for social progress, though by different means. Juliana pursues journalism, while Marianna joins a terrorist organization.

The symposium "Public and Private Vengeance: Electra and the Trojan War" will explore the tale in various historical contexts. It will include lectures, panel discussions and skits by Stanford faculty and ample opportunities to sample authentic Greek cuisine.

"The symposium will place the ancient tragedy by Sophocles in a series of wider contexts," said Stanford classics professor Richard Martin, who will be giving the symposium's keynote address. "These include where it fits in with other plays on the Electra theme in antiquity; how it has figured in the long history of the reception of Classics up to the 21st century; and what it says about emotions and politics — revenge and its repercussions for the individual, the family, the city-state."

William Eddelman, Stanford drama associate professor emeritus, will deliver a lecture titled "Electra Images: A Family Triptych" at the symposium. He will exhibit 36

images from over a span of 3,000 years in 40 minutes.

"I will be showing how this myth is being shown in film, opera, dance, sculpture and painting," Eddelman said. "I will give an overview of how various types of artistic forms project the Electra storyline."

Because the festival showcases several art forms of the Electra myth, different aspects of its storyline are revealed, according to Rehm.

"The audience will see variation in terms of who the major actor is and whether or not the crime is justified," he said. "In Sophocles' play, there are no furies so it looks like the murder was justified. It will also vary in terms of male-female dynamic and which character the audience sympathizes with." ■

Intern Daniela Reichelstein can be reached at dreichelstein@pawebly.com.

**What:** "Electra Festival," one major play, two stagings, a symposium and a film series presented by Stanford Summer Theater at Stanford University  
**Where:** "Electra" by Sophocles in Memorial Auditorium; "Libation Bearers" by Aeschylus and "Electra" by Euripides in Pigott Theater; "Public and Private Vengeance: Electra and the Trojan War" symposium in Pigott Theater; Monday night film series in Annenberg Theater.  
**When:** The theater festival opens July 23 and runs through Aug. 15. See [www.summertheater.stanford.edu](http://www.summertheater.stanford.edu) for specific performance dates and times.  
**Cost:** "Electra" by Sophocles is \$20, the symposium is \$80 and the stagings and films are free.  
**Info:** Call the box office at 650-725-5838 or go to [summertheater.stanford.edu](http://summertheater.stanford.edu). The website also has information about Stanford Summer Theater's free film series on Electra.