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Paris

Reviewer John Slavin
February 2, 2004

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A scene from *Paris*, a story based on Greek mythology.
Picture: Supplied

PARIS
By Jon English and David Mackay
Stella Entertainment, National Theatre, St Kilda, until February 7;
Frankston Arts Centre, February 11 to 14.

Right at the curtain rise of directors Michael Coe and Peter Fitzpatrick's production, *Paris*, the audience burst into spontaneous applause.

You can't blame them. I am informed that the CD of Jon English and David Mackay's score has been around for 14 years. Thursday night then marked its Melbourne premiere.

The ambition is epic: to tell the entire story surrounding the Trojan War. The first act focuses on the Trojan prince, Paris (Ben Spaul) and his erotic involvement with Helen (Angela Scundi), wife of the powerful Spartan king Menelaus (Phil Haby).

The second act replays the details of the consequent war when the Greeks, led by Agamemnon (Peter Dennis) besiege Troy. The Trojans lose when Achilles (Mike Gardiner) slays the Trojan champion, Hector (David Bramble) and then accept that treacherous gift, the Trojan horse.

The production of this Jon English creation is simple and effective. Coe's design places the action in a circular arena with overlooking ramparts that reflects the structure of a classic Greek theatre.

Choreographer Roman Berry employs his dancers to telling effect as warring armies, frightened civilians and as a line of black-caped Fates who interfere with the outcome of hostilities.

The result is a clear, engaging version of a complex dramatic text.

Musical director Andrew Patterson and his band of electronic synthesisers are discretely hidden from sight but dominate the proceedings.

The cast is miked Broadway-style and, as a result, the diction of the singers is tested in the big ensembles delivered by an enthusiastic chorus.

These effects produce an urgent narrative rhythm in the first half, reminiscent of the choruses of *Les Miserables*, but there is a sense that every number has been written as a show stopper.

If this is a tragic love story, where is the memorable love song?

It comes early in act two when *Paris* and Helen sweetly avow: *For Better or For Worse*.

The score, in fact, dips into a diverse range of styles ranging from heavy metal to gospel. Scundi makes a youthful Helen while Spaul's Paris looks and sounds like a young Rod Stewart.

There are some fine moments, noticeably the Greek ensemble that plots the war; they break into the funky, cynical *Business!*, a topical hymn glorifying the opportunities for profit that war brings.



Singer-writer Jon English.
Picture: Neil Newitt

This is perfectly pleasant music driven by the dramatic needs of the story it has to tell that could grace a Disney animated feature.

The show's intelligent theatricality, together with the energetic dedication of its young cast, make it an entertainment that outshines many a professional show with a big budget.

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