

Alice Tuan's recent *Ajax (Por Nobody)* turns Greek tragedy inside out.<sup>1</sup> It takes the sexual subtext of many Greek tragedies—the taboo marital liaison of Oedipus, the rape of Creousa, the marriage to death of Antigone—and makes that subtext text: *Ajax* chronicles a terrible drug-fueled evening in the life of four porn stars, one that ends, appropriately, in tragedy. Like Edward Albee's *The Goat*, Tuan's *Ajax* is less a direct adaptation of a Greek tragedy than an exploration of what “tragedy” means in the context of American theatre, and even American social context. Tuan's clever use of classical allusions and stage techniques, however, roots the play in the most ancient of performance traditions even as it pushes the boundaries of contemporary sensibilities concerning sex and sexuality.

In many senses (including legal, physical, and ethico-moral), Tuan's *Ajax* is un-performable (and indeed Salvage Vanguard's production in Austin in 2004 was billed as a staged reading). Though many troubling acts occur off-stage *à la Sophocles*, many do not, including explicit multi-person sodomy. In fact, the piece's first classical allusion is to a particularly athletic sexual act enigmatically termed “The Double Penelope,” made famous by Alma, the piece's protagonist (pg. 4). Alma's central personal crisis, however, is her “waiting [and] weaving” (pg. 56) for her porn-star husband, who has taken the “classic name Dick Odyssey” (pg. 52). In the absence of Dick, Alma has no choice but to enlist her friend Annette for an evening of fun'n'games with neurotic swinger Jesse and his megalomaniac friend Alexander, who insists on the epithet “Great.” The evening thus begins as two classically identified characters—Alexander and Penelope—enter into an explicitly sexual liaison.

As the evening devolves into chaos—including screwball comedy gunshots—Tuan invests several of the more stunning plot twists with deep classical roots. A post-coital conversation between Alexander and Annette includes an unbelievably awkward *anagnorisis* scene, modeled on Orestes/Elektra: “You look like my sister when she ... was young” (pg. 74), to which Annette can only silently respond: *She woozily looks into his eyes, a moment of horror, then passes out into his lap*. Or, similarly, a reference to *Philoctetes*, as a porn star contemplates her “wound constantly oozing” (pg. 41). In these instances, Tuan slyly elevates the tragicomic tone by alluding to the (putatively nobler) tenor of the Greek plays.

But as the title indicates, Sophocles' *Ajax* provides the background for the play's dénouement. As the games turn cruel, Alma/Penelope screams “IO IO MOI MOI!... IO MOI MOI AIAIAIAS!” (pg. 72), in which *Ajax*'s Greek subtext actually makes its appearance in Greek. This is followed by yet another scene in which the symbolic is swapped for the concrete: instead of Sophoclean deoculation as symbolic for castration (on Freud's reading), Tuan substitutes an actual castration, as Jesse, in an aborted assault scene, “twists off one of ALEXANDER's balls” (pg. 80). As blood covers the floor, Tuan composes an American *Ajax* and a Greek one concurrently, as Annette furiously scrubs the floor with the cleanser AJAX: “Wet surface. Sprinkle AJAX freely. Rub lightly with a paste with sponge or pad” (pg. 80). But the quasi-magical incantation of the cleanser's Ajax's properties can't stop the Greek Ajax from re-emerging: the castrated Jesse stumbles into the room and “impales himself on the American Music Award,” previously stolen from a neighborhood house (pg. 81). The evening thus ends with the dominance of Greek tragedy over the reassuring bromides of American commercial advertising: as in the Sophocles, Ajax's purifying powers are assured only through death.

---

<sup>1</sup> Now published in *Play: A Journal of Plays*. Issue #2, 2004, pp. 35-86.