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Palomar's updated 'Lysistrata' is creative, edgy

By: PAM KRAGEN - Staff Writer

It takes a lot to titillate modern audiences, thanks to the sexual imagery and language easily available on reality television, MTV and the Internet. Yet even by modern standards, Aristophanes' classic Greek comedy "Lysistrata" is surprisingly frank.

To bring an end to the 20-year-old Peloponnesian War, the warriors' wives barricade themselves in Athens' Acropolis and go on a sex strike, vowing to withhold their favors until a truce is signed. Through much of the play, the sexually agonized men stalk the stage with huge erections and the language is salty and suggestive.

In a new adaptation by Palomar College theater director Michael Mufson and Andrew Friedman, the 2,500-year-old play gets a modern face-lift with updated language that is funny, ribald and occasionally even shocking. The idea is to raise the eyebrows of even today's rap music-loving youth, and it works.



"Lysistrata"
When: 4 p.m. Oct. 5 (post-show discussion forum); 8 p.m. Oct. 6-7; 2 p.m. Oct. 8
Where: Howard Brubeck Theatre, Palomar College, 1140 W. Mission Road, San Marcos
Tickets: \$12, general; \$10, seniors; \$8, students (for mature audiences)
Info: (760) 744-1150, Ext. 2453

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There's not much subtlety in the message (Aristophanes' double-entendres are sometimes exchanged for vulgarities that may offend some viewers), but the Mufson-directed production at Palomar is colorful, creatively imagined and entertaining.

Aristophanes was known as history's first anti-war playwright, and "Lysistrata," for all its sexual subject matter, was more about war, not sex. This is made immediately clear in an audio montage that opens the Palomar staging (credited to FisheyeMongrel). Snippets of inspiring, heroic speeches from war films ("Braveheart," "Apocalypse Now," "Patton" and "Alexander") gradually morph into the less-than-inspiring sounds of clanging swords, sprays of bullets and the blood-curdling wails of dying men.

Through the play's principal character, the strong-willed Athenian wife Lysistrata, Aristophanes suggested that peace could be achieved if women (with their gentle and nurturing natures) were in charge. In the Palomar production, Lysistrata (played with noble dignity by Frances M. Regal) is the only character who speaks in an elevated, poetic style drawn from Aristophanes' original. The rest of the characters sound like today's teenagers, with modern slang, curse words and pop culture references.

While the war in "Lysistrata" is described as a contest between Athens and Sparta, the Palomar production incorporates visual gags that could reset the play in modern Washington, D.C., complete with a magistrate (renamed here Director of Internal Controls, or D.I.C. for short) who bears more than a passing resemblance to George Bush and a Greek chorus transformed into U.S. senators who sail into the play aboard the "Dukester" (the lobbyist-owned yacht used by imprisoned San Diego congressman Randy "Duke" Cunningham). And as for the men's prominent erections? Mufson has found

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an inspired way to update these exaggerated protrusions to today's political/war milieu.

Mufson has also upped the sexual ante by setting the play during the Aphrodesia Festival, one week of each year when the soldiers return from battle to have sex with their wives.

The physical production is fresh and creative, particularly Molly Faulkner's choreography, which ranges from Keystone Kops-style antics for the rapping Old Guards to graceful balletic moves for the women's chorus. Wendi Hrehovcsik's original music serves to punctuate the laugh lines and underscore the mood in the play's more serious moments. Ken Imaizumi's costumes cross time, with the women dressed in togas and modern, cleavage-bearing lingerie (a bit too bare in a few distracting cases).

Regal leads a game 22-member cast. Standouts include Raven Larsen as Lysistrata's sex-starved co-conspirator Kalonike and Aimee Janelle Nelson as Myrna, the Athenian wife who tries to seduce her aroused husband, the Rambo-like warrior Captain Kinesias (played with peacocklike bravado by Chris McDougal), into signing a peace treaty. Neha Curtiss plays the ideal buffoon as the D.I.C. (who refers to himself as "tricky Dick," in a reference to Richard Nixon).

The women's chorus includes P.J. Anbey, Sandy Tate, Rachel Crain, Amanda Smith, Kelly Iversen and Pilar Ruffin. The chorus of senators includes Destini DiGiorgio, Terence Lipps and Jared Spears. The old guards are played by Richard McMillen, Jack Ashcraft and Nicole Lewis. Lettie S. DeAnda plays the Spartan wife, Lampito. Krystene Zehnder plays the Assistant D.I.C. Sean LaRocca plays Private Parts. And Ryan Balfour plays General Disorder from Sparta.

"Lysistrata," subtitled "A Peace to End All Wars," runs one hour, 45 minutes, with intermission and because of its strong sexual content is not suited for children.

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