

Memnon' Review: To Fight or Not to Fight?

In Will Power's play for the Classical Theater of Harlem, Eric Berryman stars as an Ethiopian king drawn into the Trojan War.



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The trappings of royalty don't always send the intended signals. Take the gilded crown of laurels gleaming expensively atop the head of Priam, the king of Troy. He means the jewelry to underline his status, to augment his gravitas, but no such luck. Even gussied up, he is unmistakably a twit.

His nephew Memnon, though? That man has majesty. As embodied by a gripping Eric Berryman in "Memnon," Will Power's Trojan War verse play at the Classical Theater of Harlem, he radiates the charisma, integrity and serious-mindedness of a leader. He has a sense of family duty, too.

Not to be confused with Agamemnon (same war, different king, opposite side), Memnon has traveled all the way from Ethiopia, where he is king, to answer his uncle's call for help. A great warrior, he is uncertain that he wants to join the battle, though Troy is a decade deep in combat and in danger of imminent defeat.

Memnon has not forgotten the painful slights he has endured for being Trojan only on his father's side: treated as "not fully Trojan, kin and not kin," he says. Is a society that has always regarded him that way, led by a king who also sees him that way, worth risking his own life for?

His moral wrestling is at the heart of the play, his blend of affection and alienation speaking to the present with bracing clarity.

“It makes no sense, to fight for that which has proven time and time again that you will forever be other,” he says. “And yet, golden moments do I have. Good memories in Troy.”

Berryman, magnetic and commanding, will make you ache for this deeply feeling demigod — may make you wish, even, for a whole play centered on him. But, title and star turn notwithstanding, this is not that; Memnon gets surprisingly scant stage time.

Conceived by Power and Carl Cofield, and directed by Cofield, “Memnon” is diffuse in its storytelling, with loads of narrating and exposition, and not enough life in it. Some lines leap out with their sharpness, as when Helen (Andrea Patterson), the beauty of legend, says to Priam (Jesse J. Perez): “Caught up you are in who is foreign and who is citizen. Why not who is true and what false?” Yet there is a density to the text, and a dullness to much of the performance.

Onstage at the Richard Rodgers Amphitheater at Marcus Garvey Park, where Riw Rakkulchon’s set looks like a container for a postmodern rock musical, Tiffany Rea-Fisher’s stylized choreography punctuates the production, though neither movement nor music (by Frederick Kennedy) is a prominent element.

The night I saw the show, the audience was eager to be entertained and connected with. You could hear it in the laughs that the script’s occasional insults got, the low murmurs when Memnon spoke of being othered, the applause at a slo-mo moment of battle. (Fight direction is by Emmanuel Brown.)

A vital spark was mostly missing, but it was not a wasted evening — not with Memnon there, plumbing his complicated civic love.

“I returned to fight not for Troy but for its becoming,” he says. And off to face Achilles he goes.

Through July 27 in the Richard Rodgers Amphitheater at Marcus Garvey Park, Manhattan; cthnyc.org.
Running time: 1 hour 15 minutes.

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