

**Palo
Alto**

Weekly

Weekend Edition

ART

**Clay and
Glass fest
returns**

Page 11



NEWS

**Downtown
Library to
close?**

Page 3

THEATER

*Stanford Summer
Theater adapts a
randy Greek comedy*

Page 8

SPORTS

**M-A all-stars
still alive**

Page 41

**HOME & REAL
ESTATE**

**Fencing
without
swords**

Section 2

The Midpeninsula's
most complete
real estate listings
and classified section

www.PaloAltoOnline.com

Battle of the Sexes



News 3 Personals 16 Eating Out 17 Movie Times 24 Calendar Listings 27 Sports 41

Arts & Entertainment

A weekly guide to music, theater, art, movies and more, edited by Robyn Israel

Sex

as a weapon

Amie Abrams, as Myrrhine, and Geoff Hoyle, as Testicles, star in Stanford Summer Theater's production of Aristophanes' "Lysistrata."

Stanford Summer Theater stages a modern adaptation of Aristophanes' 'Lysistrata'

by Robyn Israel

Imagine transporting the women of "Sex and the City" back 2,000 years ago, to the time of ancient, war-torn Greece.

Except instead of indulging their lusty appetites, they decide to withhold physical gratification from their mates until peace is declared against the state's enemies.

That is the premise of Aristophanes' comic masterpiece "Lysistrata," which will be presented by Stanford Summer Theater through Aug. 9. At its heart is Lysistrata, a fiercely independent and spirited young woman who uses sex as a weapon to end the Peloponnesian War. Newly adapted by Amy Freed, the play remains faithful to the original, yet is updated with modern references and jokes.

"Despite the formal structure, there's still a sensibility and a wit and an acute parodic vision, a sense of social satire that's alive and delightful," Freed said in a recent phone interview. "There's still parts of him (Aristophanes) that breathe wonderfully today — exuberant ways of talking about serious subjects."

Aristophanes, Freed said, was the first comic playwright. "I think in his own time, Aristophanes was appreciated in the way we would appreciate Mel Brooks. He wasn't an academic subject of study. He was their top





(left) Geoff Hoyle (foreground), as the magistrate, marches past (l-r) Stephen Pratt, Geoff Sobelle, Jordan Kaplan and "Zack;" (bottom) Stanford drama lecturer Amy Freed, a Pulitzer Prize nominee, adapted Aristophanes' "Lysistrata."



Don Fera

playwright," she said.

Like the original, Freed's version makes liberal use of phallic jokes — a tactic that might shock some theatre-goers, but was very common in ancient Greece.

"They didn't have a lot of shame. The naked body was very much in evidence. There wasn't a sense of taboo. They had this whole tradition of phallic comedy," Freed said.

"I was sort of shocked when I read it (the original)," she recalled. "It's like 'Dumb and Dumber.' It's body humor, farting, really explicit and sexual. We're really still puritans, even though our culture is X-rated and sex is everywhere. I was blushing at the Aristophanes version."

Though her female sidekicks — Kalonike, Myrrhine, Siliconia and Spankmene — are sex-obsessed throughout the strike, Lysistrata (the name means "leader of the armies") remains an ennobled, serious woman who — with no man of her own — doesn't seem to have a

problem going sexless.

"She's a lightning rod for revelation and radical change," Freed said. "She's the spirit of Athena and Athens. And there's a clear-minded quality about her. So I don't think it's right to make her a comic buffoon. She's like the Mission Girl in 'Guys and Dolls' or 'Major Barbara' in Shaw's play, someone who's all about passion for truth and justice and upending evil things."

Anne Gregory, a recent Stanford graduate who plays Lysistrata, created her own back story for the Joan of Ark-like character.

"As an actress, I'm thinking some man close to her had died in the war. She wants to end this incessant fighting. She doesn't see a point to it," said Gregory, a last-minute addition to the cast after Katie Sigismund, the original Lysistrata, came down with mono and had to bow out.

In the original play, Lysistrata must contend with a magistrate who is the voice of civic authority, a figure who is more powerful than a present-day judge, according to Freed. She adapted the war-hungry character, naming him Lord Testicles, an apt foil for Lysistrata and her supporting cast of characters.

"He's sort of the Phil Silvers and the Jackie Gleason of the male outfit who confronts the women," actor Geoff Hoyle said of his role. "He represents stubborn male, reactionary war power, sort of a combination of Dick Cheney, George Bush, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz."

Director Rush Rehm, the founder of Stanford Summer Theater whose area of expertise is Greek tragedy, got the idea for "Lysistrata" last summer, in the wake of world events.

just so angry about what was happening," Rehm said at a recent rehearsal. "It mattered to me and the timing was right."

Last October, Rehm consulted with Freed, whom he's known for years. The pair convened at the American Academy Institute in Rome and Rehm provided her with notes, various translations and thoughts on the play. Freed, he thought, was the perfect playwright to take on the task of adapting the classic comedy, which was first staged in Athens in 410 B.C.

"She's a terrific writer — witty, smart as a whip — all of these align her with Aristophanes," Rehm said.

Freed, a fellow member of the Stanford drama faculty whose previous works include "The Bard of Avon" (staged at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco) and "Freedomland," accepted the challenge and worked on the play for six months, collaborating with San Francisco Mime Troupe's Bruce Barthol, who wrote the play's music. She found the experience to be a welcome change from her usual writing.

"Doing an adaptation is more pleasure than pain," the Pulitzer Prize nominee said. "It's more fun, because you don't have to think of plot and story troubles. The challenge is how to stay true to Aristophanes' play, yet make it living, breathing, contemporary theater, and make a case for some of the structural aspects of the ancient play."

"I simplified the language, made it less stuffy, more believable for young actors to say," Freed explained. "But I tried to stay true to Aristophanes' intentions and the wonderful metaphors and speeches that the characters deliver."

Kay Kostopoulos, a member of the Stanford drama faculty who plays both Kalonike, a "Kim Cattrall-like sex vixen," and the old woman Salubria, thought Freed succeeded in straddling a fine line between comedy and political statement.

"There are some dark serious moments in the midst of comedy, but you're not hammered over the head with the political points. There is subtlety, and then it takes you by surprise when it comes down to earth."

(continued on next page)



Geoff Hoyle and Annie Abrams star in "Lysistrata."

"I'm politically active and I was

'Lysistrata'

(continued from previous page)

Some of the scenes are very character-driven, with the men's weakened states providing great comedic moments. In one, a desperate Kinesias (Geoff Sobelle) pleads with his wife, Myrrhine (Annie Abrams), to satisfy his desire. Taunting and teasing him seductively, she holds fast and firm to her goals.

"It's really poking fun and teasing at gender differences," Sobelle said. "It's a battle of the sexes."

For Hoyle, "Lysistrata" is a powerful indictment against the present administration.

"I'd love this country to respect the Constitution once again, because it looks like people don't get the information they need to make informed decisions. I see it as a fun way of countering that railroading effect of the shrill right wing, which seems to be gaining power frightfully. It is only entertainment, but we can make fun of those people. I can use what I do to puncture those pompous balloons and take the wind out of their sails."

Asked what message she would like theatre-goers to leave with, Kostopoulos thought for a moment, pondering the play's impact.

"I wondered if it would have as much impact, now that the war is 'over,' but I hope it makes people think twice before we get into this mess again. Who knows if art has that power. I only hope that it did." ■

WHAT: Aristophanes' "Lysistrata," presented by Stanford Summer Theater. The production will feature a new adaptation by playwright Amy Freed.

WHERE: Stanford's Pigott Theater, adjacent to Memorial Auditorium

WHEN: Through Aug. 9. Show times are Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 7 p.m.; 2 p.m. matinees on Aug. 2 and 9.

COST: Tickets are \$25. Student/senior discounts and group sales are available.

INFO: Call (650) 725-ARTS or visit www.stanfordtheater.org.

A special panel discussion entitled "Serious Laughter: Comedy & Social Issues," will take place on Monday, July 28 from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. at the Pigott Theatre. Playwright Amy Freed, director Rush Rehm, actor Geoff Hoyle and the San Francisco Mime Troupe's Bruce Barthol will engage in a lively conversation about the intersections of comedy, politics and social issues. Admission is free. For more information call (650) 725-2650 or visit <http://continuingstudies.stanford.edu/course/EVT50.asp>

About the cover:

Kay Kostopoulos, as the vixenish Kalonike, co-stars with Jordan Kaplan in Stanford Summer Theater's production of "Lysistrata." Photograph by Don Feria.