

Denver Center's epic 'Tantalus' on video

Tantalus: Behind the Mask

Documentary DVD

The Working Arts Library, 2008

A GREEK TRAGEDY with a happy ending?

Don't tell Cassandra.

The fates, though, finally smiled on *Tantalus*, the ten-hour, nine-play epic from 2000 that brought international acclaim to the Denver Center for Performing Arts—after bringing seven months of pre-production anguish to most of the artists involved. A contemporary revision of the many myths and legends surrounding the Trojan War,

Tantalus was a twenty-year obsession of writer John Barton, co-founder of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and director Peter Hall, who enlisted an international army of theatre gods to try and make the thing work on stage. Happily for us, a team of videographers caught every drop of blood, sweat, and tears.

They also shot way too much footage of company downtime, talking-head interviews and other boring stuff that should have wound

up on the cutting-room floor. Still, serious students of theatre, classical and otherwise, will find moments of fascination in these two-and-a-half hours. We follow Achilles' sensational war dance, for example, all the way from a local junkyard, where Irish composer Mick Sands seeks just the right metallic tones for his percussive score; to the rehearsal hall, where choreographer Donald McKayle turns those irregular rhythms into fierce ensemble movement; to the stage, as the cast performs the sequence full-out, in full battle gear, on Dionysis Fotopoulos's sand-covered set. (The white-bearded design genius from Greece was jokingly mistaken for Zeus by some in the cast.)

Aspiring actors, too, can learn much by observing two masters at work: Greg Hicks and Alyssa Bresnahan, who rehearse tirelessly, perform fearlessly and speak eloquently of their principal characters, Agamemnon and Cassandra—"a pair of really lost and broken people," as Bresnahan says. Simply watching Hicks stop to smell a rose backstage, really smell it, in the midst of a ten-hour acting

marathon, is a lesson in how a real artist interacts with his environment.

But we see little of Hall's direction. Perhaps, like the gods who punished proud Tantalus with a tormented afterlife, he didn't want to give away all his secrets.

This behind-the-scenes documentary aired on PBS in late 2001 and was re-released on DVD a few years later, but at a price (over \$200) few could afford. Working Arts is offering this re-release for \$69.95—still steep, but a worthwhile expense for most.

In his exit interview with the *Tantalus* documentary team, Hall calls his epic creation "a model of what theatre ought to be about, and never is." No doubt some would take issue with that. For Barton and a few others—like Mick Gordon, the gifted young director who felt so oppressed as Hall's assistant that he suddenly left the project with a few weeks' rehearsal remaining—*Tantalus* was a creative tragedy that probably haunts to this day.

Audiences in Denver, though, witnessed a triumph. *Tantalus: Behind the Mask* reveals just how close Hall and company came to disaster. Watching them, occasionally suffering with them on this DVD, one wonders whether great art can happen any other way.

—J.Y.C.

Costume Craftwork on a Budget: Clothing, 3-D Makeup, Wigs, Millinery and Accessories

By Tan Huaixiang

Focal Press, 2007

THE TABLE OF CONTENTS of Tan Huaixiang's new text reads like a graduate program catalogue in costume technology. As you scan the titles for the ten topics developed



Tantalus

