

Director's Note

The Persians (472 BC) is the oldest surviving play in history; it is the earliest surviving historical play in European literature; it is the only surviving ancient Greek tragedy based on an actual historical event; last and not least, it is the earliest surviving play to use a ghost!

In *The Persians* we watch a man whose life is devastated by his actions and the effect his fall has on his people. Gods keep all things within their proper limits and Xerxes has sought to transgress those boundaries. Aeschylus uses the Persians' defeat as the basis for a probing examination of empire and human ambition—one that might well have had ominous overtones for the Athens of his time, with its own increasing imperialist ambition abroad.

Greek tragedies are meant to be universal, but to be truly universal for us, reality must first penetrate the thick insulation that normally protects us from pain. Only by understanding in our own terms the horrors that Xerxes caused can we understand why he calls himself a "sad hollow, born to bring home .../sorrow, sorrow.../my heart howling from its bony cage." He is his spirit's lowest ebb. This is the ending of the *Persians*. It is a cautionary tale and a timeless one.

Universal themes act as to a mirror to our consciousness—personal and political. Universal themes mirror today's world: how can we justify the horror that we support and tolerate—Darfur, Iraq, Afghanistan? "Tread soft as you sob out your dirges/ Sorrow our sorrow/ Mourn, mourn your sons dead and gone, dead and gone./ To show dirging dirges we shall lead you home."

As you sit and watch this play, think of our own temptation to vaunt our power throughout the world, to treat other cultures as mere objects, without truly understanding them, and to remake a world in the image of the one, rather than the image of the many.

For this reason, the Siena production attempts to create a bridge that spans our leaders' unquenchable thirst for power and history of their arrogance. It is staged in a traditional Persian Ta'ziyeh, an annual ritual performed on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Hussein, grandson of the prophet Mohammad, to help us remember how swiftly we forget the past and thus allow history to repeat itself. This form of theater employs an in-the-round where the actors, occupying the central space, at times break the dramatic illusion and

Speak directly to the audience. In addition, this production punctuates scenes with contemporary sounds and imagery as the drumbeat of remembrance marches us through our pain and suffering.