Basic Ethical Thought Seen
In Ancient Greek Tragedy

By GYNTER QUILL
Amusements Editor

There was a fatuous statement, not long ago, by one who should know better, that the Greek dramatists knew nothing of ethics, of good and evil as we understand them.

The author should read Aeschylus’ “Oresteia” again, or better yet see Patricia Cook’s production of the classic in Baylor Theater, in which the tragedian was saying things about ethics and the conflict of good and evil that are as valid today as they were 2,500 years ago.

Aeschylus’ thoughts on those matters were trenchant parts of his trilogy in which he argued that man cannot excuse his deeds by blaming Fate or the gods, and by that argument is therefore an emancipated individual with a free will of his own.

The points are not overlooked in Cook’s production which, played on barren, rocky ground before massive palace gates far upstage and with the side stages opened for the first time in years, by players wearing masks covering the upper part of the face, has its beauty in simplicity of statement and appointment of the tragedian’s gripping story of betrayal, murder and revenge.

True, there was a curse involved, imposed by the gods upon the family of Atreus, but what happens is brought on by the individual’s acts.

AGAMEMNON, King of Argos and a son of Atreus, is murdered after his victorious return from the Trojan War by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus. But he had given his wife a double motive, the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia to appease the gods and then his infidelity at Troy.

That is spelled out, with the violent action taking place off stage in the Greek tradition, in the first play, “Agamemnon.”

In the second, “The Libation Bearers,” Orestes, the king’s son, returns after years in exile and, urged by his sister Electra, takes bloody vengeance on his mother and her lover, repays them in kind.

For that he has to flee the Furies, whose function is to punish wrongdoers. In the final play, “The Furies” or “The Eumenides,” he appeals to Apollo at Delphi and is referred to Athena at Athens.

The goddess, who speaks here as representing Zeus in the matter, conducts what is probably the first recorded trial by jury, casts the tie-breaking vote herself in favor of Orestes, who was justified in his actions, and pacifies the Furies by making them protectors of Athens.

AESCYLUS HAS words in his play, to the effect that woe springs from wrong, the plant is like the seed, that sound remarkably like the biblical warning that as you sow you shall also reap.

He also raises several times the moral question of the justification of a war which he looks upon as a destructive evil, one that cost innumerable Greek lives on the plains of Troy.

Connie Gravitte plays Orestes with well modulated voice and grace of movement that help him get to the heart of the matter. Stephani Hardy’s Clytemnestra is intense, but if it is maintained on a single level it is at least not apoplectic.

Peggy Woody’s Cassandra is a properly distraught character, yet one of the more interesting types. There are nice contributions, too, from George Odom as a power-hungry Aegisthus, Sherry Willis as Electra, Brad Erickson as Pylades, friend of Orestes, and Tom Simmons and Emily Riddle as Apollo and Athena, stilted, literally, to give the deities added height.

There is, too, an intriguing cross-section of the populace of any era in the Chorus which represents the shifting opinions of the man in the street, swift to condemn, equally swift to ask for mercy.

The production, enhanced by Christopher Paul’s stark setting, James W. Swain’s flowing costumes, and modal music composed by Richard Willis, is a play of movement, one with an eye to natural action and reaction but focused also on grace, rhythm and interesting groupings.

Other performances are scheduled for tonight and Saturday and for Monday through Saturday of next week, at 7:30 p.m.