

# 'Lysistrata' holding something back

Stanford version is an unpolished hoot

By Robert Hurwitt  
CHRONICLE THEATER CRITIC

George W. Bush's term in office has not been notable for its support of the arts, but it's been good for Aristophanes. On March 3 alone, the international Lysistrata Project resulted in some 1,030 staged readings and semi-productions of Aristophanes' almost 2,500-year-old antiwar comedy in 59 countries as a protest against the then-impending invasion of Iraq.

More productions have followed. The most prominent in the Bay Area opened

## REVIEW

Thursday at Stanford University's Pigott Theater, at Stanford Summer Theater, a "Lysistrata" newly adapted by noted playwright Amy Freed ("The Beard of Avon") with a score by veteran San Francisco Mime Troupe composer Bruce Barthol and featuring master comic actor Geoff Hoyle.

It's a pretty funny "Lysistrata," at times downright hilarious. And it certainly makes its political points, expanding Aristophanes' antiwar theme to take aim at war profiteers, including specific local firms. But given the talent associated with this production, it should be more hard-hitting and comically polished than it is.

It's always been an intensely political play, and a testament to the extent of free speech in an-



Geoff Hoyle (left) plays the Magistrate and Annie Abrams is Myrrhine in Amy Freed's adaptation of Aristophanes' "Lysistrata."

cient Athens. Aristophanes wrote and staged "Lysistrata" in 411 B.C., when — as director Rush Rehm points out in his program note — Athens was in the 20th year of the 27-year Peloponnesian War and had suffered some major defeats (the war would cost Athens half its population). Its central idea, of women staging a sex strike to make the men sign a peace treaty, has resounded throughout the millennia since, even in eras when Aristophanes' graphically sexual and scatological humor was taboo.

Freed, surprisingly, hasn't really made the play her own. A writer with a terrific knack for mimicking the voices of other authors (everyone from Edgar Allan Poe and Emily Dickinson to Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell), she sticks pretty close to the original. She renders some of Aristophanes' most enduring comedy in bright, contemporary language; drops the more obscure references and most Rabelaisian humor; and invents clever names for the teasing women (Silliconia, Spankmene) and ever-more frustrated

men (Testicles, Prophylactus, Viagrus).

But Freed doesn't build much on the sexual politics nor Aristophanes' more universal antiwar theme. She and songwriter Barthol tend to focus on more topical material. Rehm magnifies that aspect with slide projections (by Kalilah Robinson and Megan Cohen) that hammer home information about American military interventions and the many connections between defense contractors and members of the Bush-Cheney administration and their families. It's good information, but it weighs heavily on the play.

More problematic, though, is the nature of the production. The Summer Theater, co-founded by Rehm, presents itself as a professional extension of Stanford's drama department. But "Lysistrata" looks more like a student project with a few professional ringers. Hoyle, a master of physical comedy, stands out from the rest, whether as a gnarly female delegate from the enemy country — with a comical Slavic accent — or as Testicles, the increasingly visi-



**Lysistrata:** Comedy. By Aristophanes, adapted by Amy Freed. Directed by Rush Rehm. (Through Aug. 9, Stanford Summer Theater at Pigott Theater, Memorial Auditorium, Stanford University. 90 minutes. Tickets \$17-\$25. Call (650) 725-2787 or visit [www.stanfordtheater.org](http://www.stanfordtheater.org).)

bly sex-starved leader of the Athenian men.

Geoff Sobelle makes a strong impression as a soldier in abstinence extremism, with some hilarious phallic puppetry. Kay Kostopoulos, another of the few professional actors, is a solid, wryly comic presence as one of the striking women. But the rest of the cast, mostly recent Stanford drama graduates, doesn't appear up to the demands of the material. Rehm's pacing is slack and the comic timing of many of the actors is off. The singing is wobbly, though the cast doubles well instrumentally as the onstage War Widows and Veterans Band (under Barthol's musical direction).

Anne Gregory is an aptly serious and deadpan but somewhat faint Lysistrata. Annie Abrams is sweetly flirty as her principal co-conspirator, the sex-kittenish Myrrhine, but isn't quite in command of her more farcical moments. The women in general don't communicate how much their abstinence is costing them with the comic intensity Aristophanes demands.

Rehm's "Lysistrata" looks good, with Connie Strayer's Greco-sexy women's costumes and phallic-puppet tunics and Mark Guirguis' two-tiered classical set, vividly lit by Chad Bonaker. But it only plays well in momentary comic spasms.

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