

# Calendar

## Darkside Groupies

### Grass Roots Greeks

**H**e's one of those marvelous heroes of Sophocles's who always have that obsessive grandeur," says David Cohen, speaking of Philoctetes (fill-ock-TEE-tees). Cohen will take the title role in a staged reading of the play *Philoctetes* on Monday.

"And like all of Sophocles's heroes, including Antigone and Electra, he's admirable," Cohen says. "And yet, you just know, if you met him in real life, you wouldn't be able to stand to be around him."

In this case it's literally true, since Philoctetes has a fetid snake bite and a curse that prevents it from healing.

#### LOCAL EVENTS

If one were to summarize the play in headline form, how would it read? WOUNDED SOLDIER, LEFT FOR DEAD, IS VISITED BY AGENDA-DRIVEN FORMER BUDDIES AFTER TEN YEARS; SOLDIER IS PISSED; KICKS BOOTY; IS REDEEMED. Would that do? "That's pretty good," says Linda Castro, who with Cohen cofounded the ongoing series of ancient Greek play readings three years ago.

Castro says they draw on a "solid pool" of 15 actors for these bare-bones, unrehearsed productions by the Grass Roots Greeks. She describes the readings as "a way for actors to come together to exercise their acting muscles." She says that although cast members familiarize themselves with their individual parts beforehand, the production is "almost a cold read for them as a group."

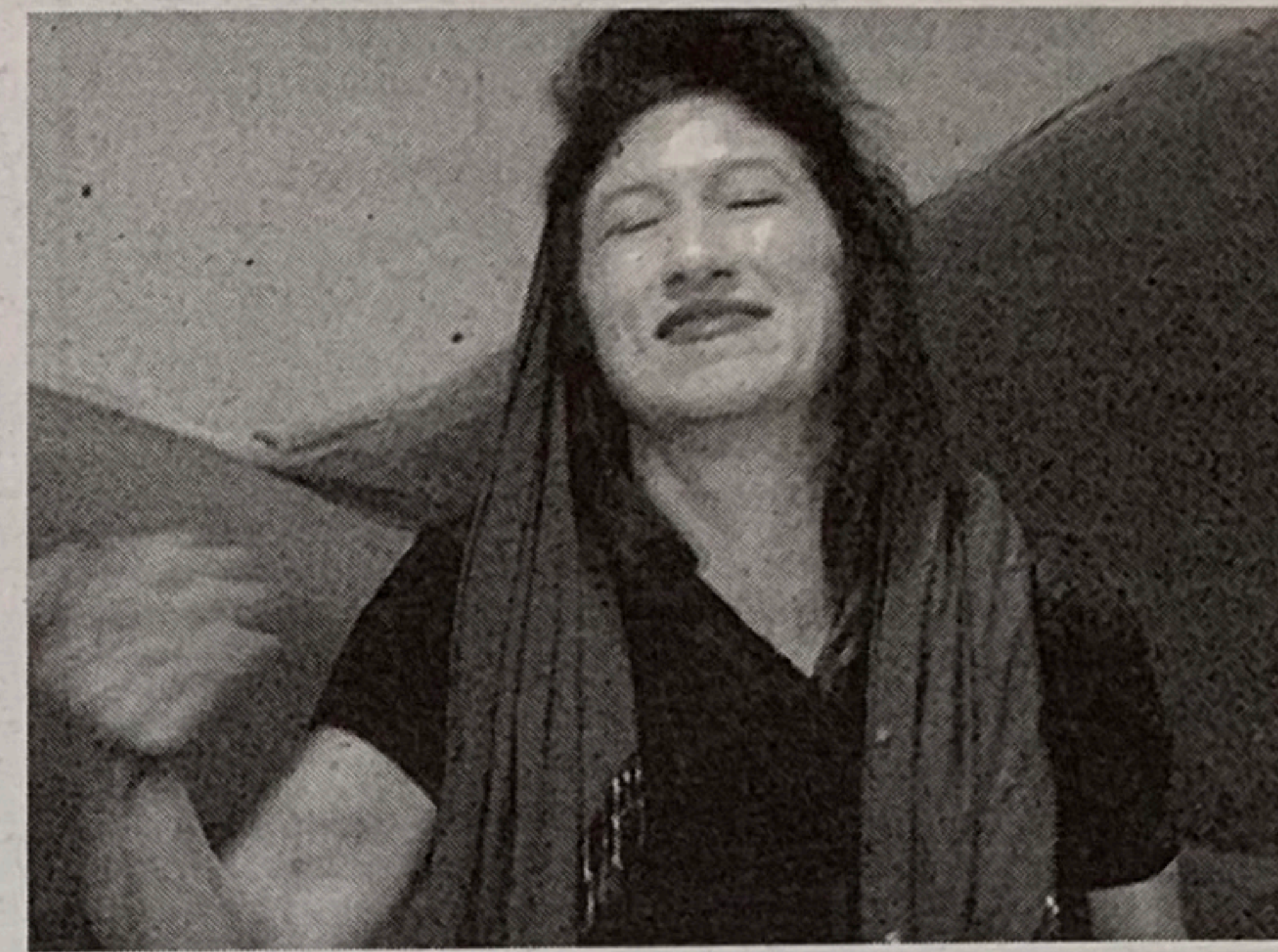
There are no sets, costumes, lighting effects. Actors merely sit in a circle with scripts. The play is followed by discussion with the audience. "And we have just as many questions as they have," says Castro.

Greek dramatists are famous for not showing violence; it's invariably a messenger who arrives onstage to describe witnessed horrors. Messenger parts are minor, but the speeches so intense that "any actor is thrilled to get one of those 'messenger speeches' to perform," says Cohen.

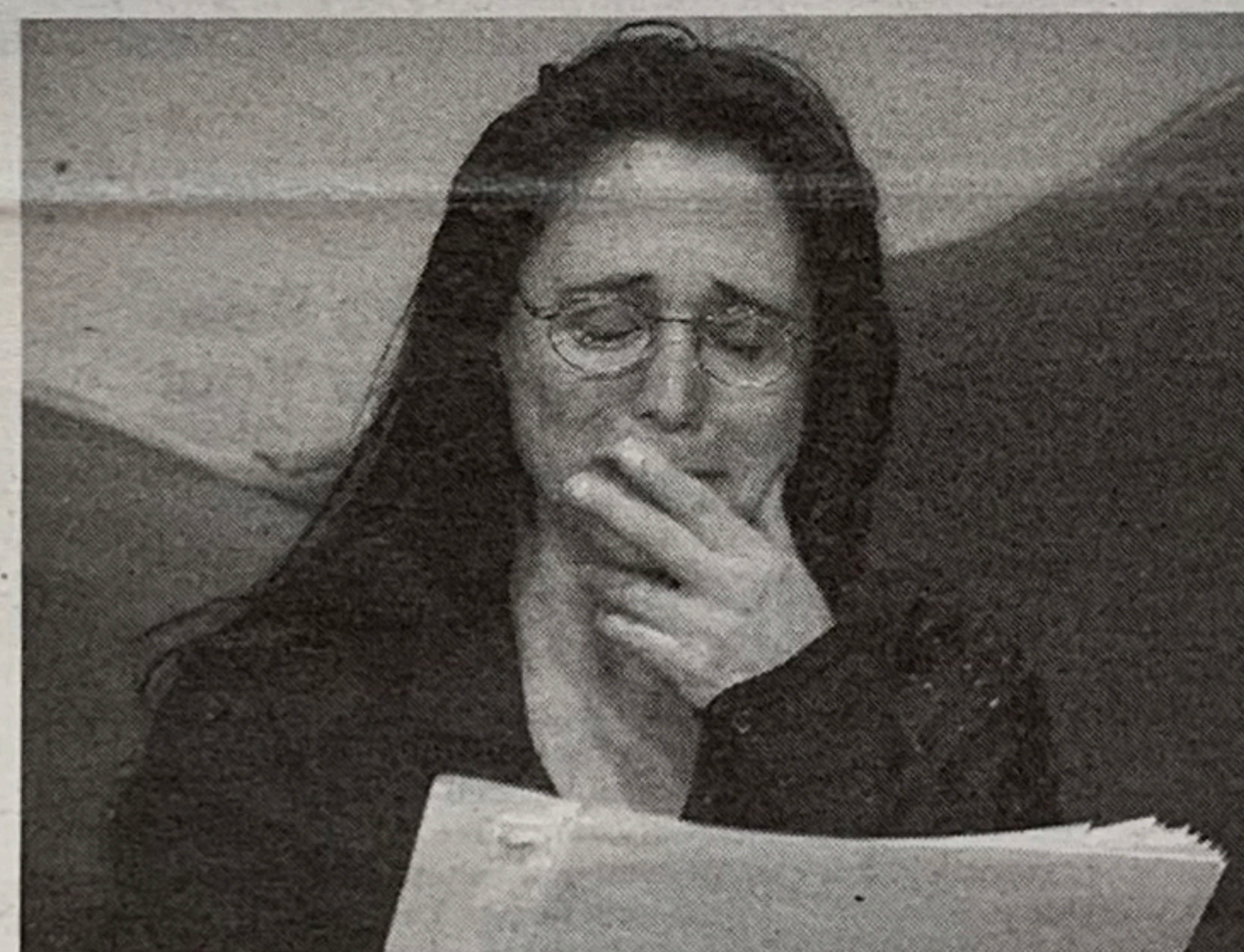
In *Philoctetes*, which Sophocles wrote at age 87 in 409 B.C., the last of his plays he saw produced, the violence has already been done by the opening scene. "It's really a coming-of-age story about a character in a moral dilemma," says Cohen. "He's caught in a crossfire between his own sense of decency and what he's been assigned to do, which is lie to Philoctetes." So instead of the



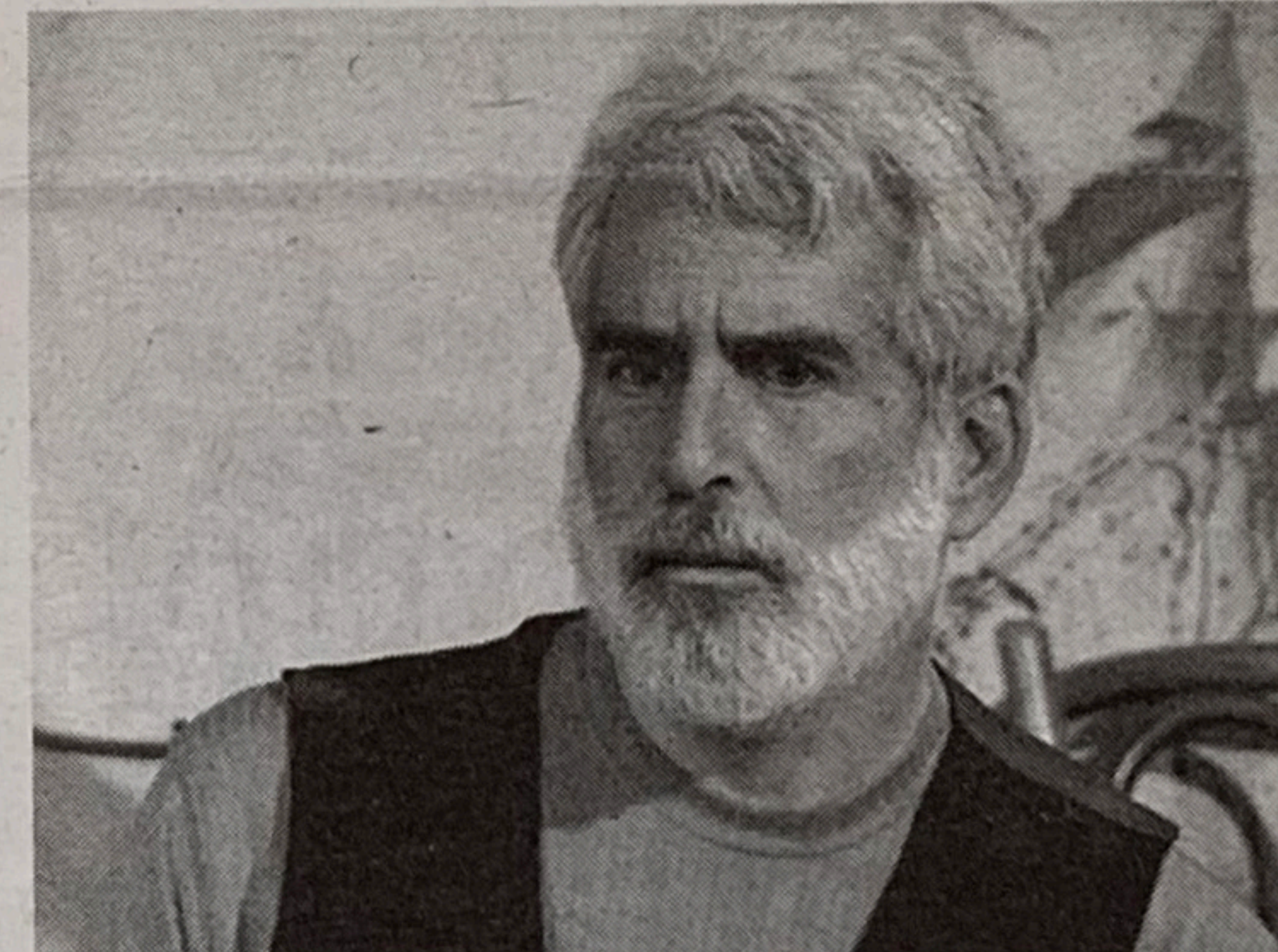
Sally Stockton (left) and Pat DiMeo as Chorus in *The Trojan Women*



Celeste Innocenti as Cassandra in *Agamemnon*



Linda Castro as Andromache in *Andromache*



David Cohen as Talthybius in *The Trojan Women*

usual fireworks, there is psychological violence.

"It revolves around intrigues and deceptions," says Castro. The backstabbing is metaphorical. "I've gotten calls from the men in our circle [of friends] and men outside the circle, too, about this play. [Well-known local directors] Doug Jacobs and Scott Feldsher said if I ever staged this, they wanted to be a part of it. It must resonate with them and things that have happened to them in their lives and in the corporate world. They feel very, very strongly about this play."

It seems by this time there must be regulars who attend the popular, award-winning series. Greek groupies? Castro says yes. "People are grateful that this has been able to provide them with some theater food that they've been longing for."

She isn't just making a self-serving statement. Something's in the air, apparently. It's not just in San Diego that people are discussing Greek drama. Castro says she and Cohen attended "a gathering of 'Greek geeks' up at the Getty Center. People from all

over the world were there."

Cohen thinks it's because, considering the world situation, we need the "depth" that the Greeks provide.

The plays are starting to be revived in full productions, including those in San Diego. Why aren't they a genuine staple in American theaters? "They're often static," says Castro. "There's nothing clever to do with them. There's just the text." She adds that the casts are "huge," relatively speaking — "always at least 12 people." Plays with more than 4 or 5 are currently considered too costly to produce.

Cohen thinks the Greeks aren't produced with any regularity in this country because Americans don't always feel comfortable with "the darker side of human experience." He describes one of the plays as "a train wreck you can't look away from." This quality is, of course, what also makes it so powerful, he says.

There are 46 known Greek classics. By early June, after doing eight more plays, by Euripedes and

Aeschylus, Grass Roots Greeks will have completed the canon. What happens next? "We're in conversation about this now," says Cohen.

Since these are only staged readings, it's tempting to think one could get friends together and do what the actors are doing. What do Cohen and Castro think? Don't try this at home? Or...? "I would say totally try this at home," says Castro. "We both say that," says Cohen. "Coming to hear actors read is going to be a different experience by far," Castro continues, "but reading these plays aloud with friends and other interested parties? Either way, you just can't lose."

— Jeanne Schinto

**Staged reading of Sophocles's *Philoctetes* by Grass Roots Greeks**  
Monday, January 26, 7:30 p.m.  
6th @ Penn Theatre  
3704 Sixth Avenue, Hillcrest  
\$5 donation suggested  
Info and reservations:  
619-688-9210 or  
[www.sixthatpenn.com](http://www.sixthatpenn.com)

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