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A CurtainUp New Jersey Review *Argonautika*

By [Simon Saltzman](#)

Gather a crew from far and wide, all the heroes and strong men you like. Think of it Jason, to sail so far beyond where anyone has ever sailed, the open water, the unknown sea. And when you return, covered in glory this kingdom shall be yours.— King Pelias

I thank you for this privilege and shall endeavor to do my best.
— Jason



A scene from Argonautika

Stage director/adaptor Mary Zimmerman has a reputation for materializing worlds of make-believe and mythology. Her apparent love for these subjects and her flair for communicating the fantastical with a minimum of expenditure and excess give her a special distinction. Her latest creation, the mythology-based *Argonautika* follows in the imaginative and artfully executed tradition of her Tony Award-winning Broadway success *Metamorphosis*, as well as *The Secret in the Wings* and *The Odyssey* that were seen at the McCarter in 2005 and 2000, respectively.

The Chicago based theater artist clearly aims to delight audiences by sharing her infatuation with those malleable and mysterious worlds. The creative assist she gets from key collaborator set designer Daniel Ostling is invaluable. Ostling uses space sparingly but decisively. Blonde wood paneling of various shades frames the stage. A floor-to-rafters pole becomes the mast of the Argot, as ropes and pulleys complete the ship's rigging. Elevated walkways, ladders, trap doors and openings high above the stage serve for a number of exciting surprises. The production appears to be constantly in motion whether on land or sea. This makes for a consistently arresting visual experience. And Zimmerman's tongue-in-cheek text rarely lets us down. Cepheus asks King Pelius, "But what about the fleece? How will you get it if Jason dies?" Pelius's instant response is "Who gives a fuck about the fleece? Are you serious? Some stinking

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piece of wool that's been rotting in the rain for twenty years?" This exchange sets the tone for the rest of the dialogue.

For this comically inflected but seriously intended saga, Zimmerman draws her inspiration from such ancient texts by Gaius Valerius Flaccus (translated by David R. Slavitt) and Appolonius Rhodius (translated by Peter Green). She has conjured up a thought provoking, but entertaining way to look at the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts and his search for the Golden Fleece.

In Zimmerman's humorously contrived terms, the play considers the ludicrously ill-advised and seriously misguided sea-going Greek adventurers/Argonauts who set sail on the Argot. The production itself has made the two year overland journey from Chicago's Looking Glass Theater to Berkeley, California's Berkeley Rep. to Washington D.C.'s Shakespeare Theater to the McCarter Theater without any apparent mishap.

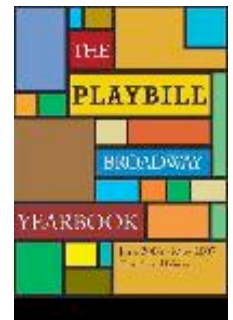
It's a given that human beings have been dramatized since the dawn of drama as survivors of hard and perilous times. But they are just as often revealed as victims of their own attempts to achieve and gain more than the gods would permit. Zimmerman uses her adoration of the absurd and the magic of the stage to cleverly explore the lessons we need to learn. Given the unique style of performance and the flip dialogue, it's hard not to laugh at the most horrifying encounters, including suicide and murder. The attitude and behavior of spiteful and playful gods and goddesses is another key element in this primarily sardonic entertainment. Of course, the mortals and half-mortals have their personal flaws and collective issues and Zimmerman considers their unwittingly manipulated lives with comical compassion.

There is spectacle aplenty, but it is brilliantly economical in its deployment. Whimsically created stick and hand puppets (the marvelous work of Michael Montenegro) vie for attention alongside the live performers. Model ships are tossed and turned in a raging sea, a gruesome monster on stilts fights the Argonauts to the death, and the fearsome flying Harpies attack their prey. These are but some of the irrepressible obstacles that Jason (Jake Suffian) confronts in his quest for the fleece. Jason and his crew don't lose much time introducing themselves as ardent rappers and as amorous sailors, especially when alone with the seductive women of Lemnos.

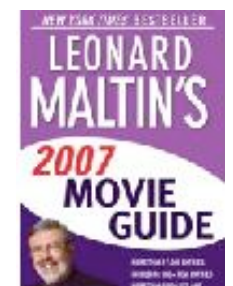
.The play uses music and sound (the thrilling contribution of Andre Pluess & Ben Sussman) sparingly but effectively, much of it is percussion in nature. The jealous and mostly disapproving Hera (Lisa Tejero) and that tough skinned armored goddess of war Athena (Sofia Jean Gomez) provide the play's delightfully droll narrative. Their ribbing and ribald asides give a contemporary flavor to the adventures. Even as Hera's dislike for the muscle-bound and dim-witted Hercules (Soren Oliver) is made evident, we also see a poignant side to this self-aggrandizing hulk with the death of his comely boyfriend Hylus (Justin Blanchard).

As seems to be the style with Zimmerman's company of acrobatically-skilled actors, the performances are marked less by histrionics and chewing the scenery than by ascribing to an almost Brechtian-styled form of naturalism. This compliments the imposed and sassy commentary and the extremely witty and pun-infused dialogue. Standout impressions

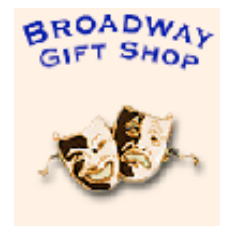
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include Allen Gilmore, as the aging, ailing and devious King Pelias who sends Jason on the journey from which he hopes he will not return; Tessa Klein as a beguiling Aphrodite who strides about in spiked-heel platform shoes and is instrumental in making the virginal Medea (Atley Laughridge) fall hopelessly in love with Jason. Ana Kuzmanic's costumes are for the most part colorful and dreamy although her all-white cloth attire for the sailors has a somewhat this-will-suffice look.

Philosophical, metaphysical, mythological and superficial elements bravely but also broadly collide. But they also mesh rather well in this ambitious play in which we see man both as determinedly heroic and intrepid even as he is consigned to failure. The political aspects of Argonautika are also not lost as we witness the senselessness of war when it is motivated by greed and conquest. Just as Act 1 is occupied with the Argonauts perilous misadventures, Act II seemed a bit rushed and slap-dash in its attempt to tie up loose ends that include a decidedly mordant perspective on the ill-fated marriage and tragedy of Jason, Medea and the children.

Speaking of children, I suspect that teenagers especially will find this version of the classic myth hugely entertaining. Even so, after two and one half hours and at a point when even such wondrous characters as these need to call it a night, we are grateful to see them permanently affixed in the heavens as glittering constellations. We are, nevertheless, reminded to "look up...see them...sailing, still sailing, even as we sleep. ,"

Argonautika

Written and Directed by Mary Zimmerman

Cast: Lisa Tegero, Jake Suffian, Sofia Jean Gomez, Allen Gilmore, Jesse J. Perez, Andy Murray, Chris Kipiniak, K.C. Jackson, Soren Oliver, Justin Blanchard, Ronete Levenson, Jason Vande Brake, Tessa Klein, Atley Loughridge, Anjali Bhimani.

Set Design: Daniel Ostling

Costume Design: Ana Kuzmanic

Lighting Design: John Culbert

Original music and sound: Andre Pluess & Ben Sussman

Puppetry Design: Michael Montenegro

Running Time: 2 hours 30 minutes including intermission

Matthews Theatre at the McCarter Theatre Center, 91 University Place
609 – 258 - 2785

Tickets: (\$15 - \$55)

Performances 03/16/08 – 04/06/08

Tuesdays-Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 3 and 8 p.m., Sundays at 2 and 7:30 p.m.

Review by Simon Saltzman based on performance 03/21/08



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