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[Argonautika](#)



Sofia Jean Gomez as Athena and Lisa Tejero as Hera. (Photo: Carol Rosegg)

Argonautika

First presented in written form by Apollonius of Rhodes
Adapted and Directed by Mary Zimmerman
Produced by [Shakespeare Theatre Company](#)
Reviewed by Tim Treanor

Before Aristotle, before *The Iliad*, a thousand years before the birth of Christ, we were these people: vain, ambitious, passionate, heroic, cowardly, treacherous, capricious, valiant, and generous of spirit, and willing to risk our lives and treasure to obtain something of trivial intrinsic value. Sound familiar?

Tony-award winning director Mary Zimmerman has served up a crispy, tasty version of the ur-myth of Western Civilization, the struggle of Jason (Jake Suffian) to retrieve the golden carcass of a ram from faraway Colchis and bring it back to his uncle, King Pelias of Iolkos (Allen Gilmore). To this end, he

assembles an army of mighty men, including Hercules (Søren Oliver), Castor (Chris Kipiniak) and Pollux (an amazingly athletic Casey Jackson), the immortal Meleager (Andy Murray) and the blind seer Idmon (Jesse J. Perez). What Jason does not know, but we do, is that he's being sent on a fool's errand: Pelias hopes and expects that the many ultrahazardous traps between Iolkos and Colchis will do Jason in, thus eliminating a potential rival to his throne. Pelias' scheme might have worked, too, except for the intervention of the Queen Goddess Hera (Lisa Tejero). Hera champions Jason for no better reason than that one day the mortal, mistaking Hera for an old woman, ungrudgingly carried her across a raging river.

Indeed, Hera makes Jason's mission her own, and anoints Athena (Sophia Jean Gomez) as its Chief Operating Officer. In Zimmerman's telling, Athena is less the Goddess of Wisdom and Serenity and more the Goddess of Wisecracks and Sneering, and Gomez is simply radiant in the role.

The Olympian gods behind the operation understand that even the collection of heroes which Jason has gathered are inadequate to the task before them, and so they use young Eros (Ronete Levenson, an adult woman playing an eight-year-old boy with perfect pitch) to bewitch Medea (Atley Loughridge), a sorceress and the daughter of King Aietes of Colchis (Oliver) into falling in love with Jason and becoming his ally.

Here are some of the challenges which Jason and his Argonauts (so named from the *Argos*, their powerful sailing vessel) face down: a twelve-foot-tall boxing King, who permits passage only to those who can defeat him; an island where the ancient prophet Phineas is tormented by the enormous, vicious harpies who poop on his food; an island where a water nymph drowns Hercules' servant and friend, Hylas (the excellent Justin Blanchard) in a spring; narrow straights where mountains clash into each other at random, crushing the ships sailing between them; fire-breathing bulls; skeleton armies; a never-sleeping guardian dragon - and, worst of all, their fellow humans, animated by righteous fury.

It must be obvious to you by now that not even Disney could bring such things to the stage in any sort of realistic detail, and to her credit, Zimmerman doesn't make the attempt. Instead, she uses everything in the storytelling toolbox, including puppetry (Michael Montenegro's work is superb), rap (the Argonauts, like the 1985 Chicago Bears, introduce themselves with an excellent extended rap), and, in one memorable instance, song.

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But Zimmerman's secret ingredient, both as an adapter and director, is comedy. To a certain extent, the necessary steps from realism to representationalism turn drama to comedy by themselves: enormous, grotesque birdlike creatures defecating on a man's food is horrifying and disgusting, but when it is done by delicate artistic creations, carried on poles and dropping yellow ticker-tape, it's funny. Zimmerman embraces the humor inherent in the work, and there are moments which are drop-dead hilarious.

Every comedy needs a buffoon, and Zimmerman bestows that role on Hercules - a canny choice, since a man who confuses physical strength for power frequently ends up playing the buffoon. But the most moving passage of the entire work involves Hercules, who refuses to leave the isle of Kios while his dear friend Hylas remains missing. Thus, the *Argos* goes sailing without him. The strongman's agonized search continues until Athena puts him to sleep and permits him to dream of Hylas. "This spring was waiting for me from the day I was born," Hylas explains gently, reminding us of acceptance and serenity, two ancient virtues which survive only dimly today.

Zimmerman's language as adapter is as lively and engaging as her stage decision-making. Apollonius, who first put the story down in verse, was prone to the high language; Zimmerman is more to the point. "She's saving Jason's bacon again, with her mumbo jumbo," mutters Cyrus, minion to Aietes, about Medea, as storms rage about him.

Curiously enough, the only thing which mars the brilliant theatricality of the production is Zimmerman's approach to Jason. Jason, remember, must be bold and charismatic enough to put together the greatest heroes of the age in a dangerous mission, and to be their acknowledged and undisputed leader. Zimmerman's, and Suffian's, Jason is...*polite*. He is, or appears to be, sincere.

But - well, let's just say he's not up there in the constellation with Castor and Pollux. This was clearly a deliberate choice, and not due to any limitation on Suffian's part. Dramaturg Akiva Fox notes that Jason was "a tentative leader" and the interpretation is certainly justified by the text. But it does take away from an otherwise exciting production. In fact, the passage in which Jason attempts to win Medea's loyalty is the only stale part of the play.

That leaves a play which is 97.5% fresh, brilliant and exciting. *Argonautika* is a treat and a joy from the time when we were all children, and the world opened up splendidly before us.

Running Time: Two hours thirty minutes, including one fifteen-minute intermission.

When: Tuesdays through Sundays until March 2. Sundays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays at 7.30; Thursdays through Saturdays at 8; Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2. No show February 12, no evening show February 24. There will be a matinee at noon on February 20.

Where: Lansburgh Theatre, 450 7th Street NW, Washington, DC

Tickets: \$23.50 — \$79.75. Available [here](#).

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This entry was posted on Tuesday, January 22nd, 2008 at 11:12 am and is filed under [Our Reviews](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.

3 Responses to "Argonautika"

1. *Rodney* Says:

[January 23rd, 2008 at 11:49 am](#)

So, how do you date this story to before The Iliad, especially considering that all these stories were oral histories long before they were written down?

2. *U. Gino Kneel* Says:

[January 23rd, 2008 at 1:17 pm](#)

I attended last night's opening. *Argonautika* is simply superb, and I'm very difficult to please. I did find that Act I paced its storyline very leisurely compared to Act II, which seemed like the edited highlights of a much longer work, cramming capturing the fleece, courting Medea, the arduous return journey, Medea's meltdown and its aftermath into an hour.

Watching this play however, I couldn't help reflect how a certain other major DC theatre dedicated to new American plays keeps getting beaten to the punch by the likes of Studio, Round House, Signature, and now even a classical company like the Shakespeare. It's sad to watch such a

historically significant theatre slide further into irrelevancy. Yet somehow they manage to fluff their Boardmembers, corporate sponsors and major donors for a \$120M dome. Nice trick.

3. [Tim Treanor](#) Says:
[January 23rd, 2008 at 5:26 pm](#)

To Rodney: I concluded that the Jason legend preceded the Iliad because the Iliad makes references to Jason's adventures, whereas the Jason legend does not refer to the events in the Iliad. It's not infallible, but it's a pretty good indication that Jason came first.

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