

'Argonautika'

McCarter Theatre goes on an adventure of the imagination.

By Stuart Duncan

Posted: Wednesday, March 26, 2008 4:33 PM EDT

There is nothing like an ancient myth to bring out the genius of theatrical wizard Mary Zimmerman. As a child she admittedly loved the adventures and their supernatural exploits, epic journeys, impossible tasks. Misfortunes and triumphs abounded in the stories, but even at an early age, she recognized that more serious, darker layers lurked beneath.

As an adult she found a talent for translating tales that soar on the page to the confines of the stage. Such things as sea monsters, flying gods, an arrow aimed for the heart, fleets of boats, massive armies of men all became grist for her pen and then for her director's mind. Her latest project is the ancient story of Jason and the Argonauts. Titled *Argonautika*, it is a fresh look at the journey of the Greek hero, his love affair with Medea and perhaps a few side trips to other myths of the era.

In Ms. Zimmerman's mind, bolts of silk become raging rivers, a massive sail or perhaps a sea monster. A cast of 14 becomes gymnasts, blown by terrible winds across the stage and back, climbing rigging, eschewing stairs for athletic leaps. They break into rap talk as they introduce themselves, but line up primly to announce their intent: "to please."

And they do just that, easily slipping from the stilted language of former times to modern-day vernacular. "This dress has a zipper," one announces in mock horror, bridging the gap of a few dozen centuries. So much of the evening is ensemble that it is difficult to pick out brilliant performances. A few stand out: Sofia Jean Gomez as Athena, the god who pays particular service to Jason is a constant delight. Lisa Tajero has a delicious time as Hera. Jake Suffian, likewise, as Jason. Soren Oliver almost steals the show as Hercules and Justin Blanchard, as Hylas, gives him competition.

Writer Zimmerman has used the most ancient of all texts (from the third century B.C.) as her basis, and that means plenty of blood and gore, but humor also. The setting is a simple one (one imagines that as director, Zimmerman had something to do with the concept here as well). And we have seen this versatility before — in *The Odyssey* and *The Secret in the Wings* at McCarter. In the words of McCarter's Artistic Director Emily Mann, Mary Zimmerman is "Exciting and dangerous." That's exactly what the theater of today needs. Those are the two qualities that film and television never seem to deliver.

The best thing since sliced bread? Probably not, really. But good fun, a real education if that's what you are looking for, an evening that flies by (even at 2 hours 40 minutes) and more imagination than a whole season at many theaters.

Argonautika is at McCarter Theatre, 91 University Place, Princeton, through April 6. Performances: Tues.-Thurs. 7:30 p.m., Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 3, 8, p.m., Sun. 2, 7:30 p.m. Tickets cost \$15-\$55; (609) 258-2787; www.mccarter.org

[Close Window](#)



Eros (Ronete Lecenson) flies to Aphrodite (Tessa Klein) in *Argonautika* at McCarter Theatre.