

SAN FRANCISCO

by Richard Connema

Argonautika, Sex and Ahrens & Flaherty: Words & Music

An Elegant Lucid Production of Mary Zimmerman's *Argonautika*

It is difficult to believe that the epic tale of Jason and the Argonauts and their quest for the Golden Fleece can be presented on a stage. However, the Berkeley Repertory Theatre successfully presents the Lookingglass Theatre two-hour, thirty-five minute *Argonautika*, directed by playwright Mary Zimmerman. The larger-than-life tale was presented on film by Columbia in 1963 with special effects by Ray Harryhausen, and NBC and Hallmark presented the tale on television in 2000.



**Casey Jackson, Ronete Levenson,
Tessa Klein and Jake Suffian**

Mary Zimmerman's adaptation is based on texts by Gaius Valerius Flaccus translated by David R. Slavitt and *Apollonius Rhodius* translated by Peter Green. Ms. Zimmerman has effectively presented the extensive journey of Jason and the Argonauts in an excellent, coherent, stylish show, using puppetry and other simple theatrical embellishments. Everything flows smartly from episode to episode. She uses imaginative, complex blocking and choreography to great advantage. There is even hip-hop choral singing with some amazing puppets as stage props. Once in a while one of the characters uses modern jargon, and flying wooden birds crap on the heads of the Argonauts in one scene. A towering wave transforms into a sea monster just by adding two bulging eyes at the crest of the wave.

During the Jason and Medea scene, Aphrodite slowly carries Eros's arrow across the stage to hit an unsuspecting young Medea in the breast, spreading a bright red piece of material over the young girl's stark white dress. There are a multitude of fantastical creatures, such as wired, wooden and cloth puppets that include small seagulls, a skeleton army, a giant boxer and flying harpies that engage the 14 winning actors.

Argonautika's drawback is that it is just a mite too long, especially in the second act scenes between Jason and a young Medea.

Jake Suffian plays Jason as an everyday common man. He is intentionally insipid and his acting is almost wooden. Atley Loughridge, who originated the role in Chicago, plays a sympathetic Medea. She is presented in an incredibly compassionate light as a victim of love from that wound from Eros's arrow. Sofia Jean Gomez is excellent as the strapping, grounded Athena who makes great remarks about the voyage. Christa Scott-Reed is puckish as Hera, who narrates the tale and is also involved in the story. Soren Oliver is

commanding as the boisterous Hercules who mourns in one scene his lost lover Hylas, played by charming Justin Blanchard. Allen Gilmore is terrific as Pelias the nasty old king. Paul Oakley Stovall, Andy Murray, Jesse J. Perez and Ronete Levenson are marvelous in many roles. The entire cast of 14 works exceptionally hard using their physical efforts to deliver the visuals in the drama.

The same team that designed the production at the Lookingglass Theatre last year is behind the scenes here. Daniel Ostling has designed a basic wooden two-story set using ropes and flying cables representing the ship for the athletic players to climb in many scenes. There is even a trap door and space for the "gods" below. Ann Kuzmanic's costumes are authentic skirts and tunics. John Culbert's lighting is remarkable. There is contemporary music by Andre Pluess and Ben Sussman including the percussive rap chant that introduces the Argonauts at the start. The production, with most of the cast, will move to the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington D.C and Princeton's McCarter Theatre.

Argonautika is a swift, enjoyable saga and Mary Zimmerman has delivered an entertaining presentation of Greek mythology. The drama runs through December 23rd at the Berkeley Repertory's Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St, Berkeley. For tickets call 510-647-2949 or visit www.berkeleyrep.com.

Coming next to the Berkeley Repertory Theatre will be Donny Hoch's one person show called *Taking Over*. It opens on January 11 and runs through February 10th.

Photo: Kevin Berne

Hip Hip Hooray for Sex

Aurora Theatre has resurrected Mae West's first full length play, *Sex*. This sexy stage gem caused a stir when it premiered on Broadway in 1926. It ran for one season, then was raided by the New York police for being an immoral play. The cast was arrested and co-producer Mae West was sentenced to 10 days in jail and fined \$500. Her sentence was reduced to eight days and afterwards she told the press, "It's the first time I ever got anything for good behavior."



**Maureen McVerry, Steve Irish and
Kristin Stokes**

Mae West went on to become a great star at Paramount writing almost all of her screen plays. (When I spent two years at Paramount in the 1950s, the great legend said, "I'm the kinda girl who works for Paramount by day and Fox by night.")

Sex was lost to the public until the Hourglass Group resurrected it in a production at the Gershwin Hotel in New York in 1999. It was greeted by critics as being "wickedly fun." The comedy drama is deliberately and inadvertently hilarious, full of great double entendres. It's not a well written play, but it is madly entertaining with a pot boiler plot that was so popular in early Warner and Paramount films before the Hays Office stepped in.

The plot of *Sex* is straight out of a pulp fiction magazine. Margie (the Mae West role

played by Delia MacDougall) is a street savvy prostitute in Montreal who is being pimped by her "fancy man" Rocky (Danny Wolohan). She is determined to get away from being a prostitute and marry well, especially if it is a rich man. British naval officer Lt. Gregg (Steve Irish) convinces her to follow him to Trinidad. (he says, "You can go to Trinidad and for two bucks you can get a room, liquor and a wife." Margie retorts, "It must be cheap booze."). Margie meets naïve, rich and young Jimmy (Robert Brewer) on the island. He takes her to meet the family in Greenwich, Connecticut, where he proposes to her. There are steamy subplots involving Jimmy's mother Clara (Maureen McVerry) and Margie's friend Angus (Kristin Stokes), a prostitute who wants to return to her rustic religious past. In fact, whenever she hears church bells, she stops and prays. Thrown into this mix of characters is a horny sailor (Craig Jessup).

Director Tom Ross had assembled a wonderful cast of zany actors to play various roles in this melodrama. Delia MacDougall gives a captivating performance as Margie. She does not make it a caricature of Mae West. In fact, she underplays the role in her skin tight frocks. It's a brilliant tour de force of understated acting.

Steve Irish plays three roles and gives superb performances of all. He first comes out in the most outrageous drag outfit you will ever see; he looks like Marie Dressler in the 1930s MGM film *Dinner at Eight*. He also plays Margie's "love interest," British Lt. Gregg, with an accent that borders on Austin Powers. His third role as Jimmy's father reminds me of Jim Backus' Thurston J. Howell on "Gilligan's Island."

Robert Brewer also comes out in an unbelievable drag in the first scene and then in another scene becomes the naïve Jimmy. He gives a charming performance. Craig Jessup is a delight in several roles: he steals the scene as the bawdy sailor on leave and has the perfect Irish accent as a cop. His board range of comedic styles is infectious. Maureen McVerry is side splitting as a society dame on a lark, especially when she is given a "mickey" by Rocky in the house in Montreal at the beginning of the play.

Kristin Stokes is a gem playing the religious Agnes. She looks like Mary Pickford in one of her early silent films. She also has a sweet baby voice when speaking. She also turns sexy playing the French maid in the Greenwich mansion. Danny Wolohan who plays Rocky sounds like he just left the Warner Brothers stage in an early '30s crime melodrama. There is a ring of a young Cagney in his voice. Wolohan becomes a real hoot in the middle of the two-hour drama. At a Trinidad nightclub, he comes out singing, "At the Café Port au Prince" as a flux Spanish entertainer. He is a poor man's Desi Arnaz in this role.

Billy Philadelphia serves as music director and onstage piano player. He has written three songs: "Port au Prince," which sounds like a song that you would hear in early sound films; "Under the Red Light," which is about the hard life of a prostitute in Montreal; and "Goin' Down Under," with naughty double entendres lyrics. The songs are a great asset to this sensual comedy-drama.

The original *Sex* was three acts. However, Tom Ross' version is done in in two acts. He has inserted musical numbers in the Trinidad nightclub scene where everyone gets into the act.

Cassandra Carpenter has created some superb 1920s period costumes for the cast, especially the stunning sensual gowns for Margie. Greg Dunham has devised a colorful set with a revolving stage that moves perfectly to the various locals. Tom Ross' inventive direction is perfect.

Sex is the kind of show you should not take seriously. It is good comedy with a "nod nod, wink, wink" delivery.

Sex runs through December 9th at the Aurora Theatre, 2081 Addison Street, Berkeley. For tickets call 510-843-4822 or visit www.auroratheatre.org. Their next production is Diana Son's *Stop Kiss*, opening on January 25th.

A Pleasant Afternoon with Ahrens & Flaherty: Words & Music

Four dynamic Broadway personalities recently flew in from New York to give a warmly entertaining gift to fans of Broadway by the Bay. Lyricist Lynn Ahrens and composer Stephen Flaherty, the Tony winning team of *Ragtime*, *Once on This Island*, *Dessa Rose*, *Seussical*, *Lucky Stiff* and *My Favorite Year*, brought with them the golden pipes of legendary Broadway stars Marin Mazzie and Jason Danieleley. Mazzie and Danieleley took a week off from their Broadway gigs *Spamalot* and *Curtains*, respectively, to be on the San Mateo Performing Arts Stage. Ahrens and Flaherty flew here just after the opening of their latest show: *The Glorious Ones* at Lincoln Center.



Steven Flaherty, Lynn Ahrens, Jason Danieleley and Marin Mazzie

Words and Music is a revue of the 20-year collaboration of these two musical geniuses. It is not really a show but a laid back afternoon set in the composer's living room as they talk about how they created the songs. Marin Mazzie with her effervescent, multi-talented voice and Jason Danieleley with his golden tenor vocal cords were outstanding singing both well known and little known songs from the pens of Ahrens and Flaherty.

Stephen Flaherty at the piano and Lynn Ahrens started the session out with a few bars of "At the Beginning," with Marin and Jason coming on stage to join them before going into an upbeat arrangement with new words for "The Show Biz," a song cut from *Ragtime*. Jason Danieleley tenderly sang the heartfelt "Larger Than Life" from *My Favorite Year*. Mazzie and Danieleley then sang two numbers from the little appreciated *A Man of No Importance*: Mazzie's touching "Love Who You Love" followed by Jason's buoyant "The Streets of Dublin." The two artists beautifully presented "At the Beginning" from the Fox film *Anastasia* and segued into the waltz melody "Once Upon A December" from the film. The latter became one of the film's principal motifs used in the underscore by David Newman.

Ahrens and Flaherty's first Off-Broadway hit, *Lucky Stiff*, was represented by Marin sounding like the French singer Lilo on the comical "Speaking French" from the almost forgotten show. *Once on This Island* was also represented with Marin's earthy "Mama Will Provide," sung with a lot of passion.

The composer and lyricist told the audience how difficult it was to get *Seussical* onto the Broadway stage. There was constant rewriting in the pre-Broadway run in Boston, with chatters on the Internet chiming in about the problems. All four sang "Green Eggs and

Ham" and Ahrens and Flaherty, who have fairly decent voices, followed up with the wonderful "It's Possible."

Ragtime was well represented, with Stephen Flaherty scorching the ivories in a stimulating instrumental interpretation of the show's opening number. Marin and Jason were sublime singing "Our Children" and Jason was powerfully dramatic singing "Make Them Hear You." The whole cast did an inspiring version of "New Music." Jason and Marin were magnificent in the love duet "Opposite You" from the recently opened *The Glorious Ones* (they also announced to the audience that they were celebrating their 10th wedding anniversary).

The composer and lyricist, along with the exquisite vocal cords of Marin and Jason, did three encore songs to the enjoyment of the audience. "Beautiful" was based on photographs that Lynn Ahrens' father took in 1950. She dedicated the song to her deceased dad. Jason brilliantly sang "I Was Here" from *The Glorious Ones* and the group ended with the humorous "Nice" from *Lucky Stiff*. Lynn Ahrens showed the clever side of handling great droll lyrics in that song. ("You were impossible, unbearable/ My nerves were also unrepairable/ But now that it's through/It was nice.")

Ahrens and Flaherty: Words and Music played November 8, 9, 10 and 11th. At present *Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens: Words & Music* is a work in progress. The composer and lyricist are trying out ideas for future shows of their music.

Cheers - and be sure to Check the [lineup of great shows this season in the San Francisco area](#)

- [Richard Connema](#)