

literature



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Theater Review : Argonautika

POSTED BY [PHILIP MAYARD](#)

The word "genius" seems to get thrown around a lot in performing arts circles, but there isn't an adjective more appropriate for writer and director Mary Zimmerman, whose latest theatrical thrill ride, **Argonautika**, is making a spectacular west coast premiere at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

This marks Zimmerman's fifth return to the Rep, where critics and audiences have generally (and many would say, rightfully) fawned over her uniquely inventive and often breathtaking style of theatre-making. Of these productions, the one that likely still lingers in the minds of Bay Area theatre-goers is **Metamorphoses**, Zimmerman's Tony Award-winning staging of Ovid's classic tales, which she set in and around a massive pool of water. With **Argonautika**, the MacArthur "genius" grant-winner returns to the fables of Greek mythology, this time chronicling the heroic adventures of Jason and the Argonauts, and their epic quest for the Golden Fleece.

Drawing from the ancient Greek texts by Apollonius Rhodius and Roman poet Gaius Valerius Flaccus, Zimmerman and her production team from Chicago's [Lookingglass Theatre](#) have created a world where the lines between sets and costumes, props and lighting, and acting and improvisation are blurred.

With the majority of the action taking place on the high seas, artists of less ingenuity might have chosen to again set this production on a pool of water. Instead, Zimmerman has collaborated with set designer Daniel Ostling to create an astonishing scenic playground of blond wood platforms, heavy swinging ropes, industrial metal clamps, trap doors and catwalks which, when accompanied by marvelous lighting effects by John Culbert and the occasional large swath of billowing fabric, can magically transform the performance space from the windswept deck of the ship to the dark forest of Mysia.

From a towering, ridiculously goofy Poseidon to a flying team of skeletal harpies -- who seem to have a bit of an incontinence problem -- Michael Montenegro's astounding puppets work beautifully with Ana Kuzmanic's costumes, which range from spare tunics on the men to dazzling gowns and drag queen-worthy platform boots on the ladies. Sound effects blend seamlessly with several lovely original musical compositions by Andre Pluess and Ben Sussman.

Argonautika is very much an ensemble piece, with nearly all of the large cast of 14 given ample stage time. Once Zimmerman sets up the main story line -- Jason is given the formidable task of recovering the Golden

Fleece by his power-hungry uncle Pelias; a mission which Pelias believes will be the death of his teenage nephew -- the cast storms the stage with bongo drums and belts out a rollicking rap-style roll call. This number really puts the "fun" in functional, with each of the characters stepping forward to introduce themselves, although, between the tribalistic pounding of the drums and hand-clapping in the audience, some of the dialogue is difficult to decipher.

As the reluctant and all too imperfect hero -- aren't they all? -- at the center of **Argonautika**, Jake Suffian's tormented Jason is a great match for Atley Loughridge's hopelessly love-struck Medea. While Zimmerman's interpretation of the infamous character of Medea is surprisingly sympathetic, her take on the relationship between Hercules (as portrayed by a boisterously delightful Soren Oliver) and Hylas (a charming Justin Blanchard) is perhaps even more interesting. Oliver's Hercules is the king of the locker-room jocks, all raw muscle power and unbridled arrogance. But when his companion Hylas turns up missing, a heartbroken Hercules is inconsolable. It's pretty clear that Zimmerman believes these guys were a lot more than just "friends." (The scene in which Hylas is lured into the spring of Pegae by a beautiful nymph is particularly memorable.) Other outstanding contributions include Christa Scott-Reed's contemptuous Hera, Sofia Jean Gomez's antagonistic Athena, Ronete Levenson's wailing Andromeda, and Allen Gilmore's paranoid Pelias.

For those who live in the city, it can be somewhat of a stressful schlep to make a 7:30 or 8:00 curtain in the East Bay (and I'd highly recommend you join in one of the lively pre-show docent presentations, which happen every Tuesday and Thursday, 30 minutes prior to curtain). But like the classic voyage of Jason himself, the journey to Berkeley Rep for this astounding production is well worth it. Employing a top-notch ensemble of actors on stage and a magnificently creative production team backstage, **Argonautika** is theatrical storytelling at its finest.

Argonautika runs through December 16, 2007 at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. [For tickets and information](#) visit berkeleyrep.org.

Want to see a piece of genius filmmaking? [Check out this clip](#) from the 1963 film adaptation of **Jason and the Argonauts**, with special effects by Ray Harryhausen. Decades before the days of CGI, this absolutely mesmerizing battle scene, in which Jason and his band of well-built Argonauts battle an army of skeletons, apparently took four painstaking months to create via stop-action animation. The sequence is still largely considered to be one of the greatest special effects scenes in movie history.

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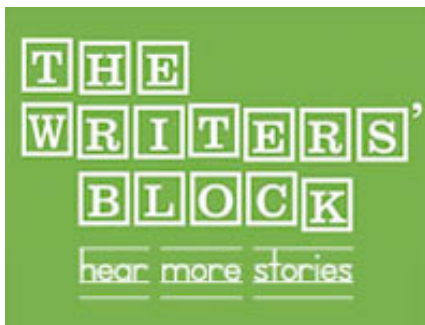
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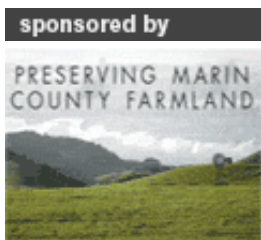


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