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## 'Argonautika' a lively update of Jason myth



By Howard Shapiro

Inquirer Theater Critic

We all have our Golden Fleeces to capture, and our own versions of sea monsters standing in the way and guardian angels who help us defeat them. In the end, after all its dazzling theatricality and beautiful characterizations, that's why playwright-director Mary Zimmerman's *Argonautika* works.

It's a fantastical - and fantastic - rendering of the Greek myth, sometimes colloquial, sometimes not, and always streaked with humor and easy to follow. And Zimmerman's reimagining of Jason and his crew of Argonauts in pursuit of the unreachable is entirely relevant. I sat there, in Princeton's McCarter Theatre, swept up in the whims of jealous gods and goddesses who control fate and mete out punishment, and the everyday mortals who fight for the impossible. It seemed to have everything to do with the way life works.

That's why Greek myths, especially when told this well, endure - they have the power to put you inside the allegory. Zimmerman, who won a Tony in 2002 for directing *Metamorphoses* and recently debuted at the Metropolitan Opera with her staging of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, has an organic understanding of adaptation; in her vision, each thrill in the voyage of Jason and the Argonauts has its stage equivalent.

The goddesses Hera (Lisa Tejero) and Athena (the expressive Sofia Jean Gomez, who ties the story together with the zest of a smart ESPN play-by-player) pop out everywhere. You're watching the procession on stage, and they poke from the ceiling of Daniel Ostling's deceptively simple all-wood set, which serves as, well, the whole world. They look down from a catwalk, or take center stage to scheme, always in Jason's favor (but not in that of poor Hercules, who is one of his crewmen and played by Soren Oliver with a revealing vulnerability).

The Argonauts body-bump with glee, wave fabric until it becomes a monster, and row with such fine timing that the stage could be moving. They turn Greek chorus, at one point, into rap - you sense immediately that one communication is cousin to the other. Original music by Andre Pluess and Ben Sussman perfectly suits the story's wide range of emotion. John Culbert's lighting, Ana Kuzmanic's rich costumes (check out Aphrodite's spike heels), and Michael Montenegro's puppetry design help bring the myth alive.

Sometimes, the action moves like dance along the stage, and sometimes it really is dance. In one scene, the burly Argonauts - a talented acting ensemble - break into sweet song to tell the sad story of the isle of Lemnos, where the women have turned against their men. In another moving moment, Justin Blanchard, as Hylas, rises from the dead to give his great friend, and possibly lover, Hercules, the psychic strength to go on. In yet another, the swooning Medea (a star turn by Atley Loughridge) examines the delights and pains when love strikes.

It's all anchored by Jake Suffian, who plays Jason in general low key. Because of Suffian's smart modulation, the heroic voyager is not so different from all of us who look on. McCarter produced *Argonautika* with three other theaters - the Berkeley Repertory, Washington's Shakespeare Theatre, and Chicago's Lookingglass - and it must have been a major undertaking. Like Jason's voyage, it was worth all that work.

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## Argonautika

Through April 6 at McCarter Theatre, 91 University Place, Princeton. Tickets: \$15-\$55. Information: 609-258-2787 or [www.mccarter.org](http://www.mccarter.org)


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