

Review: 'Argonautika' shimmers with humor and sheer genius

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic

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Argonautika: Drama. Written and directed by Mary Zimmerman. (*Through Dec. 16. Berkeley Repertory's Roda Theatre, 2015 Addison St., Berkeley. Two hours, 35 minutes. Tickets: \$16.50-\$69. Call (510) 647-2949 or go to www.berkeleyrep.org.)*)

A sea of billowing green cloth fills Berkeley Repertory Theatre's Roda stage, a towering wave transformed into a sea monster with the simple addition of two bulbous eyes. The heroes who make up the crew of the Argo - the Argonauts - proclaim their fame in a buoyant, percussion-driven boasting contest, topped by a comically swaggering, tongue-tied Hercules. The audience holds its breath as Aphrodite purposefully carries Eros' arrow across the stage to lodge in an unsuspecting Medea's breast, spreading the bright red of an unfamiliar passion across her snow-white dress.

There's nothing like the ancient myths to evoke the genius of theatrical wizard Mary Zimmerman. "Argonautika," the latest of her Lookingglass Theatre Company creations to grace the Rep's stage, returns to the classical treasure trove she mined for "Metamorphoses," which went on to conquer Broadway after playing Berkeley. The piece that opened Wednesday at the Rep isn't just every bit as exhilaratingly inventive, breathtakingly beautiful, comic and affecting as her staging of Ovid's tales, it's also more cohesive and perhaps even more inspired.

The story of Jason and the Argonauts is one of the primal myths of Western culture, at least as old as those told by Homer, though not written down until several centuries later. Zimmerman based her text on the oldest extant complete account, the third century B.C. Greek epic poem of the same name by Apollonius Rhodius, with additional material from the retelling by the Roman poet Gaius Valerius Flaccus. The disarming humor, imaginative stagings, surprisingly touching moments and invigorating immediacy are entirely Zimmerman's and her Lookingglass colleagues'.

A hit last year in Chicago (like Frank Galati's "After the Quake" on the Rep's Thrust Stage, which also features evocative music by Andre Pluess and Ben Sussman), "Argonautika" comes to the Rep with the

same design team. The mostly new cast moves on from here to the show's co-producers, the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C., and Princeton's McCarter Theatre. If you can't see it here, you should think seriously about booking a flight east.

The story of Jason and the Argonauts' quest for the Golden Fleece and his ultimately ill-fated love affair with Medea (that's right, *that* Medea) is told with stunning, sometimes humorously self-referential, deceptive simplicity. Daniel Ostling's wondrous set looks at first like a beautiful, variegated wooden box, open in front and back, with a balcony off to one side and a stout pole rising through its ceiling. The walls, floor and ceiling turn out to be riddled with grids, trap doors, a drawbridge and other openings for John Culbert's playfully evocative lights and Zimmerman's inventive stagings.

Michael Montenegro's delightful wire, wood and cloth puppets - ranging from small gulls and skeletons to a fearsome giant and nasty, incontinent harpies - interact perfectly with the 14 engaging actors playing the humans and goddesses in Ana Kuzmanic's beguiling tunics, armor and gowns.

Jake Suffian's intentionally bland Jason and Atley Loughridge's sweetly conflicted Medea are the nominal principals. He's the common man as unintentional (and flawed) hero; she, an innocent, if wildly tattooed, maiden sorceress who finds her backbone as Jason shows his true colors (Zimmerman's take on the story's aftermath is intriguingly Medea-positive). But "Argonautika" is very much an ensemble piece, with every actor standing out in multiple roles. Sofia Jean Gomez's brash, soldierly Athena and Christa Scott-Reed's willful, sardonic Hera anchor the play as manipulative narrator goddesses.

Evil kings (Allen Gilmore, Soren Oliver), vain deities (Tessa Klein's Aphrodite) and heroic feats can be hilarious in Zimmerman's retelling. Comedy is also a remarkably effective setup for a burst of deeply affecting emotion, as when Oliver's buffoonish-macho Hercules mourns his lost lover, Hylas (a sweetly engaging Justin Blanchard). Paul Oakley Stovall, Andy Murray, Jesse J. Perez and Ronete Levenson are also outstanding in many roles.

"Don't be so literal. You miss a lot," Athena retorts when Hera points out that one of the dresses has a zipper. Zimmerman's wryly imaginative, cleverly self-conscious "Argonautika" is very much an ancient tale reframed for our own time. Its references to "glorious missions," overthrowing tyrants and invaders being greeted with flowers were not lost on a Berkeley audience. But it's also a thoroughly engaging version of a timelessly entertaining myth as told by a theatrical imagination of mythic proportions.

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