

Theater Dogs

Backstage with Chad Jones



[Review: 'Argonautika'](#)

By Chad

Thursday, November 8th, 2007 at 11:54 am in [Berkeley Repertory Theatre](#), [Daniel Ostling](#), [Mary Zimmerman](#), [local theater](#), [plays](#), [theater review](#).

Zimmerman dazzles in adventurous *Argonautika*

Four stars Argonaut-to-be-missed

With director **Mary Zimmerman** at the helm of the Argos, you know the voyage is going to be interesting.

Sure enough, Zimmerman, the Chicago-based visionary whose work has won her a Tony Award (*Metamorphoses*), a MacArthur "genius" grant and the admiration of audiences across the country, renders the story of Jason and the Argonauts with her typical passion and flair.

Argonautika, born in Chicago last year and now on a mini-tour of regional theaters, is Zimmerman at her most accessible and enjoyable.

Now at **Berkeley Repertory Theatre's** Roda Theatre, *Argonautika* is more fun than the last few Zimmerman shows we've seen in Berkeley. Certainly it lacks the oppressive darkness of *The Secret in the Wings*, and its story is far more captivating than *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*.

My favorite Zimmerman work will likely always be *Metamorphoses*, a work of rare beauty and emotion, but a close second is 1996's *Journey to the West*, a piece of epic storytelling that managed to be both intimate and grand, imaginative and illuminating.

That's what *Argonautika* is ... gorgeous storytelling in which surprises abound. We expect adventure and fun

as Jason and his men set sail for Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece.



What we don't expect is the abundant humor ... of the frat-boy and high-minded variety ... or the fantastic songs (sound design and composition by **Andre Pluess** and **Ben Sussman**) or the pockets of emotional complexity as the story evolves into something more than a myth and becomes a whole lot more about human loss and love.

The whole show takes place in a beautiful, open-backed wooden box (set by **Daniel Ostling**, stunning lighting by **John Culbert**) that is meant to evoke the deck of the Argos. To my mind, the set seemed to be more of a storytelling gymnasium in which the actors get a workout taking turns as narrators, playing multiple roles, flying in and out of the set, setting up the ship's rigging and fighting **Michael Montenegro's** terrific bare-bones puppets (the giant, the harpies and the dragon are particularly enjoyable).

Goddesses Hera (**Christa Scott-Reed**) and Athena (**Sofia Jean Gomez**) are our story guides as well as the guardians of Jason (**Jake Suffian**) and his crew as they court danger at every turn.

Most of the cast comes from the Chicago production, but local actor **Soren Oliver** is a delight as the muscle-brained Hercules whose tenderness is reserved for his soul mate, Hylas (**Justin Blanchard**). Oliver is also the imposing, xenophobic King Aietes, costumed like Ming the Merciless from *Flash Gordon* (costumes by **Ana Kuzmanic**), whose job it is to make Jason as miserable as possible.

Zimmerman's adaptation of *The Voyage of Jason and the Argonauts* gets really interesting in Act 2 when Medea (**Atley Loughridge**) enters the picture.

The young sorceress gets shot through with one of Eros' arrows, and we see the arrow sticking through her abdomen and watch her dress get increasingly bloody as she falls for Jason.

When her magic saves Jason's bacon, Jason professes his undying love and devotion to Medea and says if he ever hurts or betrays her, she should do something unimaginably horrible to him. All the while, a black-cloaked, winged creature takes down Jason's every word, and we feel the chill. We want to tell Jason and Medea's future sons to run, children, run, for their father is a lying, manipulative bastard, though he might not know it yet.

Argonautika, which runs about 2 ½ hours, travels well beyond the usual quest-adversity-triumph and takes us into the tragedy of Jason and Medea's later life, and though we lose the thrill of the adventure, we gain the depth and pleasures of truly remarkable storytelling.

For information about Argonautika, visit www.berkeleyrep.org or call 510-647-2949.