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THEATER

Mythic journey

Mary Zimmerman works her magic on the tale of Jason and the Argonauts

PATRICK FOLLIARD

Friday, January 18, 2008

For celebrated stage auteur Mary Zimmerman, western civilization's most ancient myths make perfect fodder upon which to work her brand of theatrical magic. Zimmerman — who struck Broadway gold earlier this decade with her retelling of Ovid's tales (set in a swimming pool) in "Metamorphoses" — now gives a delightful take on Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece in her new play "Argonautika" now at the Shakespeare Theatre Company's Lansburgh Theatre.

Based on Greek poet Apollonius of Rhodes' third century B.C. account of Jason's voyage and a later Latin version by the Roman Gaius Valerius Flaccus, Zimmerman's very contemporary adaptation retains the source's enduring themes of adventure and loss, while adding a healthy dose of emotional insight, camp and self-conscious laughs. The playwright offers a relevant world of unyielding tyrants and horrendous injustice tempered by an inerrable sense of fun and wonder.

TRULY EPIC, THE odyssey of the Argo and its crew of heroic Greek sailors — the Argonauts — presents a slew of compelling staging challenges including encounters with monsters, dragons, terrifying harpies, fire-breathing bulls and a regiment of skeleton soldiers to name but a few. Zimmerman and the talented design team (who originally created the production for Chicago's Lookingglass Theatre Company) have responded brilliantly with innovative staging — an ocean of green fabric swells into a pop-eyed sea creature — and an army of small nautical models and deceptively uncomplicated puppets (ingeniously executed by Michael Montenegro) cast as everything from a cooing babe to a boxing giant. The dragon guarding the shimmering fleece is portrayed by an oversized glowing eyeball.

Daniel Ostling's puzzle-like set of light-hued wood contains hatches, grills, a drawbridge and mast-like pole that at times suggest a boat, a palace and a densely wooded forest. It's the perfect showcase for Zimmerman's bag of tricks, John Culbert's gorgeous lighting, Ana Kuzmanic's imaginative costumes, and the inventive antics performed by the play's terrific cast of 15.

Throughout his travails, Jason (handsome Jake Suffian) is guided by disparate goddesses: Zeus' glamorous and impulsive wife Hera (Lisa Tejero) and the sardonic warrior princess Athena (an excellent Sofia Jean Gomez) who leads with reason and narrates much of the journey. Even spoiled Aphrodite (Tessa Klein) amusingly gets in on the act, temporarily leaving her pair of well-made male slaves (agile Casey Jackson and Justin Blanchard) to shoot a little ill-fated love into Jason's life.

Suffian plays Jason with an unbothered monotony rarely found this side of a Clint Eastwood spaghetti western, and it works beautifully. He is in turns generous and treacherous with little change of expression. Atley Loughridge's pre-infanticidal Medea is a torn, naive girl next door who just happens to be a tattooed, budding sorceress.

Like any good Greek tale, "Argonautika" contains a bit of man on much-younger-man love: When his adoring adolescent lover Hylas (also Blanchard) is stolen away by a cunning nymph, the Argo's alpha male, a clownish Hercules (Soren Oliver) possessing all the finesse of a professional wrestler — is heartbroken and abandoned by his fellow Argonauts. While Hera, the mythical enemy of the great hero, laughs at Hercules' misfortune, Athena whispers the bolstering words in his ear that allow him to move on to his next conquest. If only Jason's next adventure turned out so easily.

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A nymph (Atley Loughridge) lures the Argo's young Hylas (Justin Blanchard) to his watery doom in Mary Zimmerman's 'Argonautika.' (Photo by Carol Rosegg)

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MORE INFO

'Argonautika'
Shakespeare Theatre Company
Lansburgh Theatre, 450 7th St., NW
Through March 2
\$23.50-\$79.75
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