

Argonautika EDITORS' PICK

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Overview

The Shakespeare Theatre Company presents "Argonautika," the exciting tale of Jason and the Argonauts's quest for the Golden Fleece. [Read Editorial Review](#)

- Average Reader Rating: ★★☆☆ [4] [Write a Review](#)
- Genre Type: Drama

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Editorial Review

'Argonautika' Charts a New Course for the Mythic Voyage

By Peter Marks
 Washington Post Staff Writer
 Thursday, January 24, 2008

On the eve of its tumultuous voyage, the crew of the Argo gathers on the stage of the Lansburgh Theatre for something like a pep rally in antiquity. As drums pound and shoulders bounce, each mate steps up and exuberantly chants in modern cadences his or her name and bio -- "Hercules!" "Castor!" "Atalanta!" "Pollux!" -- as if the audience were a USC booster club and they were the bowl-bound players.

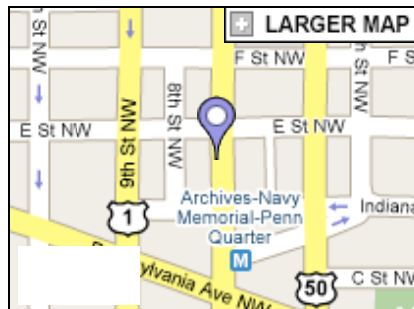
Above the intoxicating din, a shout-out would absolutely be in order, too, for the unseen captain of this pulse-quickenning squad: Mary Zimmerman, the author and director of "Argonautika," a sensational, panoramic rendition of "Jason and the Argonauts."

The Chicago-based Zimmerman, whose image-and-metaphor-rich "Pericles" was a deeply pleasurable offering in Washington three years ago, makes her return to the Shakespeare Theatre Company with this new foray into the classical canon, long the chief inspiration for her visionary style. (She won a Tony, you may recall, for the direction of her best-known play, an adaptation of Ovid's "Metamorphoses" set in a shimmering pool.)

One might have expected a new coterie of wet actors in "Argonautika," but it appears Zimmerman wants to let the waters settle. Her metier on this occasion is not tied so transparently to any one element, visual or otherwise. If anything, the story she recounts here has more to do with



Carol Rosegg for Shakespeare Theatre



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ephemeral things: the finite tragedies of man in the cosmos. Buffeted by chance, chastened by prophecy and manipulated by gods, the athletic Jason (Jake Suffian) sails confidently with his boisterous crew in pursuit of his trophy, the Golden Fleece.

It would be one thing if the tale ended with Jason's triumph at Colchis, with the taking of the fleece and the Argo's escape with the mortal enchantress Medea. (We all know how well that marriage worked out.) But "Argonautika" reminds us of the hollowness of Jason's victory, how short-term gains inevitably yield to long-term follies, how the ultimate product of human endeavor is always a permutation of heartbreak.

Zimmerman's trademark mischief with text -- her approach to the classics is what you might call a respectful irreverence -- is thoroughly on display in this work, brought dazzlingly to fruition by her, along with Zimmerman's longtime set designer, Dan Ostling. She's derived her version from accounts by the Greek poet Apollonius and Roman poet Valerius. Her mode of storytelling, evolved in the rehearsal room, mixes the language of epic soliloquy with the vernacular of our time.

It's a style geared to upending our expectation, as when Jason, rationalizing to Atley Loughridge's Medea his sexual betrayal, informs her, "It's not about you." Or when the goddess Athena (Sofia Jean Gomez), eavesdropping on their lovemaking, remarks with a profoundly urban inflection, "Oh yes they DI-id."

Those self-conscious turns of phrase are intended to demystify the stately characters of myth. Sometimes, though, the effort to modernize the dialogue feels a bit cheap -- chintzier, anyway, than the lavishly refined images that Zimmerman and Ostling and lighting designer John Culbert manage to create. The varying degrees of vocal ability among the actors also at times convey a sense of the characters being less than fully inhabited. (Some could use more of an assist from the whizzes in the sound department.)

The linguistic flatness is leavened by sheer invention, both in the staging and some of the performances. The Hera of Lisa Tejero -- she and Athena are, aptly, the story's omniscient narrators -- is as physically and vocally alluring as you'd want a god to be. Gomez's Athena is an agreeably tomboyish counterbalance. Suffian brings a steadying demeanor, too; audiences may remember him as the brainless locker-room bigot of Studio Theatre's "Take Me Out." Here, he drops the attitude, equipping the leader of the Argonauts with the proud and intrepid -- if accessible-- heart of a hero.

Jason's eventful trip is framed in "Argonautika" by the back story of the mission and where-are-they-now details of what occurred long after Jason's pinching of the fleece. A sense of doom hovers over the characters, due in part to the forecasts of the multiple seers and prophets. And yet their adventures can still embrace all that is irresistible in the human imperative to explore new worlds and try new things.

The core pleasure of "Argonautika" is the way in which we're invited to share in the delights of each exotic place that the Argonauts encounter, revealed as wondrous fruits of collective imagination. The Argo's universe is interpreted as a space of limited horizons: a room of polished wood, including a paneled ceiling. The ship's thick mast extends up through the ceiling, and a wooden catwalk is the perch for, among others, the sneaky, snarky Hera.

A tinsel-covered water nymph, a hooded Fury, a gaggle of Harpies and an assortment of monsters all make their marks, although it is the conjuring of Scylla and Charybdis that most effectively shows off Zimmerman's penchant for playing with scale. Perhaps best of all is the concept of a sympathetic Medea, run through with desire, the depth of her Eros-instigated passion for Jason expressed as a wound that never heals.

You could write out a long list of the crafty notions -- speaking of which, costume designer Ana Kuzmanic makes handsome work of this elaborate toga party -- and still omit half the catalogue. Zimmerman doesn't so much inject creative blood here as engorge it, and the ethereal images with which she leaves us make it a special contentment to go with her flow.

Reader Reviews ([Read all reviews](#)) [4]

Ar-GO-nauts! ★★★★★

Posted by MelHmel on Feb 06, 2008

Argonautika reminds me of why I love the theatre and why I go. The world that Zimmerman and her cast have created transports the audience into a fantastical yet relatable world - the puppetry work is especially impressive. And for those who know her full story, to see Medea as a helplessly love-struck young girl is absolutely heartbreaking. My only gripe is that the "modernized" inflections layered onto certain lines do, at times, distract from otherwise lovely and heartfelt moments. But, overall, the energy of this production won me over and made me a fan of Zimmerman, the Argos, and The Shakespeare Theatre...this show was a treat!

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Very entertaining ★★★★★

Posted by ryaneades on Feb 04, 2008

My wife and I are first time season ticket holders for the Shakespeare Theatre Company. We do not have a lifelong knowledge of all the classics, nor any preconceived notions of what characters should and shouldn't be. In short, we are theatrical laymen. That said, this play was greatly entertaining. Not perfect, but very entertaining. Zimmerman's talent is obvious, even to us laymen, and we walked out of the theatre thoroughly entertained.

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