

ARGONAUTIKA

BERKELEY REP

November 17, 2007

Friday night we caught Mary Zimmerman's latest offering at the Berkeley Rep. Argonautika is a dramatic retelling of the Jason and Medea myth, full of Zimmerman's inventive and quixotic reinterpretations of classical texts. This is the same Mary Zimmerman who delighted audiences with her masterful Tony Award winning adaptation of Ovid's "Metamorphoses".



In this version of the 3000 year old tale, the powerful witch, known to the world as Medea, has been rendered as a waifish victim of any number of forces larger than herself. Zimmerman employed the Peter Green translation of the text left by Apollonius of Rhodes (c.350 B.C.E.) and the version written by Gaius Valerius Flaccus -- a Roman version composed some time around 100 B.C.E.

There is actually no authoritative version as the earliest compositions of this story were made by putting together scattered legends and myths which probably originated before the dawn of the Bronze Age, and which alluded to the time of the Great Goddess and pre-Greek matriarchal cultures.

According to the Wikipedia, "The myths involving Jason also invoke Medea. These have been interpreted by specialists, principally in the past, as part of a class of myths that tell how the Hellenes of the distant heroic age, before the Trojan War, faced the challenges of the pre-Greek "Pelagian" cultures of mainland Greece, and the Aegean and Anatolia. Jason, Perseus, Theseus, and above all Heracles, are all "liminal" figures, poised on the threshold between the old world of shamans, chthonic earth deities, archaic matriarchies, and the Great Goddess and the new Bronze Age Greek ways."

The story is a set a generation before the time of the Trojan War, around 1300 BC, but the first known written mention of it comes six centuries later, in the age of Homer (800 BC). The tale came out of the region of Thessaly, in Greece, where early epic poetry developed. The Greeks have retold and reinterpreted it many times since, changing it as their knowledge of the physical world increased.

The basic story of Jason and the Argonauts goes as follows: Jason is sent on a suicidal quest by King Peleias of Iolcus (played with delightfully scenery-chewing humor by Alan Gilmore) to retrieve the legendary Golden Fleece in the kingdom of Colchis (located on the shores of the Black Sea), and specifically in the city of Aia, itself located by legend and ancient Greek historians on the "eastern edge of the world". King Peleias has been warned by an Oracle that he shall lose his kingdom, usurped from Jason's father, to a man who shall arrive wearing one shoe. Jason, who had been sent away as an infant at the time of his father's murder, arrives at the gates of the city wearing one sandal, having lost the other while crossing a stream carrying an old woman who had asked him for help. The old woman reveals herself to be the goddess Hera (played by a wonderfully imperious Christa Scott-Reed) and from that moment on Hera remains Jason's benefactor.



The fleece itself is an artifact of yet an older myth in which two children are rescued by a flying ram only to have one fall to her death and the other murdered upon arrival Colchis by the brutal King Aietes. The ram is killed and its fleece hung on a tree guarded by a sleepless dragon.

Jason gathers together a ship's crew of the most famous heroes and demigods in Greece and sails upon the ship named the Argo. After many adventures along the way he and most of his crew arrive at Colchis where the king offers to simply give the fleece away if Jason will only succeed at three labors, including harnessing magical bronze fire spewing bulls to a plow with which he is to sow the earth with Dragon's teeth. The teeth will sprout into an army of warriors that will attack him.



Induced by the gods to fall in love with Jason, Medea helps him in these labors by employing her magical powers. In return Jason is to take her away to his home.

At this point Zimmerman departs from the more commonly known versions of the story. Her Medea (played by the diminutive Atley Loughridge) is literally transfixed by Cupid's arrow. Harrah has gone with Athena to persuade Aphrodite (a vapid and giggling Tessa Klein in platform shoes) to somehow get the bratty bubble-gum chewing Cupid to work his magic between Medea and Jason.



Sofia Jean-Gomez's brash tomboyish Athena is alone well worth the price of admission. Her character goes through perhaps the widest range of emotional display, from hauteur to pity to anger, to delight and to, of course, reasonable discourse. Here she consoles the grieving Hercules after the loss of his companion.



As Jason stands in the court of King Aietes pleading his cause Medea sits in the corner of the room. Cupid fires his arrow and, delivered by Aphrodite, it pierces Medea as she looks at Jason. For the rest of the play, this arrow transfixes the suffering Medea, whose dress becomes bloodier with each scene.



The killing of Aietes is omitted by Zimmerman, and the killing of her brother by betrayal is softened considerably. In most versions Medea tricks the daughters of Aietes by killing a goat or a sheep which she then tosses into a magic pot. From the pot the revived animal leaps, having also grown younger by years. The daughters slaughter King Aietes and toss the pieces of his body into a pot provided by Medea, but this pot contains no magic and so the king dies. The brother is dismembered by Jason and the pieces strewn about the island so as to delay pursuit while the family gathers up the body parts for proper burial.

Zimmerman instead has the furious Aietes send an armada against the Argo, which is beaten back with some loss of life by winds called up by Hera. The trip home is stripped of the usual adventures as these serve largely to demonstrate the power of Medea as a witch. Jason's betrayal is presented with painful honesty in a scene that has Jake Suffian's Jason backing away from the incredulous and disbelieving Medea. "You don't understand," Jason says as he

backs out the door. "It's all bigger than us." Unlike other versions, this betrayal occurs shortly after their arrival home.

As in all the versions, Jason dies alone and bereft under the hulk of the rotting Argo. The infanticides and the death by burning of Jason's wife are described in an offhand fashion by the goddesses, who have become a bit bored by the whole story. "Too bad about the burning and those children." Medea is dragged across the stage wrapped in a shroud, a cast-off remnant of the Big Story about the Fleece.

"What shall we do with this one?" Athena asks Hera, who shrugs indifferently. It is wise Athena who chooses to tell the infrequently told story of Medea's entry into the Elysian Fields, there to marry Achilles. The two goddesses then prepare the girl "for the Change."

In nearly every version, Medea is presented as a very powerful feminine force who worships Hecate and who possesses extremely potent magical powers. She is the granddaughter of the sun god Helios and a niece of the witch Circe. In most of the versions the death of Jason is specified, but not that of Medea. Some say Medea married Achilles in the underworld. In another version of her legend, Zeus tried to court her but failed; for being the only mortal to ever successfully resist him, she was granted immortality by Zeus' wife, Hera.

Presented on bare boards with props that are mostly skeletal forms draped with cloth, Zimmerman's Argonautika relies on the physicality of her form of theatre, the language of the text, and pure imagination to hold the audience for every minute of its 2.5 hours of stage-time. The play substantially succeeds.

Those reviewers who look for "arc of the character" and for more erotic heat between Jason and Medea miss the point. The figures of Greek myths and legends never were meant to represent literary individuals as we understand them in the 21st century; they represented ideas, concepts, intangible forces of nature or the psyche of humanity. Zimmerman's play remains true to that concept.

As in the past with Zimmerman productions, the acting style is a sort of mix of *Commedia del Arte* and Grutowski, featuring broad physical gestures, acrobatics, stylized tableaux and exaggerated movements, all of which adds to the iconic presentation. The stream across which Jason carries Hera is presented by the company waving long swathes of blue cloth. As he carries her, she swings around from his back to ride his hips face to face in moment charged with eroticism.

The show was scheduled to run up to December 16, however word has it that it has already been held over due to popular demand.



Mary Zimmerman, Adapter and Director
Daniel Ostling, Scenic Design
Ana Kuzmanic, Costume Design
John Culbert, Lighting Design
Andre Pluess & Ben Sussman, Sound Design & Original Composition
Michael Montenegro, Puppetry Design
Cynthia Cahill *, Stage Manager
Amy Potozkin, Casting

Cast

Christa Scott-Reed, Hera
Jake Suffian, Jason
Sofia Jean Gomez, Athena
Allen Gilmore, Pelias and others
Jesse J. Perez, Idmon and others
Andy Murray, Meleager
Chris Kipiniak, Castor and others
Casey Jackson, Pollux and others
Søren Oliver, Hercules / Aietees
Justin Blanchard, Hylas / Dymas
Ronete Levenson, Andromeda and others
Paul Oakley Stovall, Amycus and others
Tessa Klein, Aphrodite and others
Atley Loughridge, Medea