Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Challenging Argonautika & A Challenge To American Argot

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 27th, 2019

A Noise Within (ANW) is not known for backing off of hard work. Artistic Co-Directors Geoff Elliott and Julia Rodriguez-Elliott have built ANW by sheer dint of perseverance. But they also budgeted carefully, planned carefully, chose carefully and hired carefully. And they have come a very long way since modest but notable beginnings for this company in the early1990s.

Their latest enterprise is Mary Zimmerman's massive *Argonautika*, a retelling of the myth of Jason's complicated adventures at his duplicitous Uncle Pelias' behest to retrieve The Golden Fleece from the equally duplicitous King Aëetes of Colchis—a journey from which King Pelias gleefully expects Jason never to return.

And that's just the beginning.

Mythology is a bit like Halloween. It is filled with hideous monsters or monstrous pranks planned by ungenerous gods or devised by self-interested cruel people just like us. Nothing's changed, even in the world of myths, which of course are invented by people. Jason's tale is filled with jealous gods with a twisted sense of humor and ancient seers who, like psychological *castrati*, see it all coming and can't change a thing.

I'll spare you the more intricate details of the plot, but in the main, Jason's travels from Iolcos to Colchis aboard the good ship Argo with his combat-ready Argonauts is redolent with natural and unnatural encounters. They lack only Errol Flynn on board, but they do have Jason, played here by a much more human Ty Mayberry. And there is one scene that feels harmlessly borrowed from Cirque du Soleil.

The cast of *Argonautika* at A Noise Within.

Some are pleasant events, such as being invited ashore for some dalliance by the women of Lemnos who miss having any men around; some are playfully evil, such as luring the hapless Hylas, Hercules' boyfriend, into a fountain where he's simply allowed to drown. It's all in a day's work among men and gods. The disasters range from being god-engineered, such as windstorms, colliding rocks and fighting raging bulls, or to all-too familiar human betrayal. Remember what Medea did to her philandering husband Jason and the children she bore him? Take that, Jason.

Although these events are of necessity conflated for the stage, Zimmerman's often irreverent and cheeky undertaking of a play is also unwieldy, thanks to its size and accumulating catastrophes. It

is adapted from the 3rd century BCE ancient Greek Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica*, an epic poem about Jason and the Argonauts (translated by Peter Green), plus the work of 1st century Roman poet Gaius Valerius Flaccus (translated by David R. Slavitt), who kinda rode on Rhodius' coattails. The levity in Zimmerman's script is welcome, but the production is still a lot to ask of any company, let alone one working—as ANW regularly does—in rotating repertory.

Cecil B. DeMille, where are you when we need you?

l-r, Veralyn Jones as Hera & Trisha Miller as Athena in A Noise Within's production of *Argonautika*.

Never mind. We have Julia Rodriguez-Elliott as the director here. She never backs away from a challenge, not even one as big as this one. But there is a level of overreach that even she was not able to entirely avoid. With a cast of 18 people, sometimes all on stage at the same time, and many playing more than one role, there is unevenness in the acting. But beyond the major demands made by the staging, there are equally daunting ones foisted on the scenic and costume designers (Frederica Nascimento and Jenny Foldenauer, respectively), the lighting designer (Ken Booth), the props master (Erin Walley), fight choreographer (Kenneth R. Merckx, Jr.) and overall movement director (Stephanie Shroyer). They acquit themselves mostly with honor.

Notable in the cast are Trisha Miller's pleasantly assertive Athena and Veralyn Jones' smart and haughty Hera, the two well-spoken goddesses that conspire to supervise Jason's journey when they're not conspiring against it. Cassandra Marie Murphy does an engaging turn as a comically self-involved Aphrodite (called out by Athena as "that bit of fluff"), and Frederick Stuart comes close to stealing the show entirely with his hilariously "sensitive" and super-vain Hercules.

Zimmerman reserved some quirky-funny ideas about the Eros-induced romance between Jason and Medea (Angela Gulner, who plays it with subtle edges of sincerity and comedy, which works, since humor is the spinal undercurrent of this play).

Ty Mayberry & Angela Gulner as Jason & Medea in A Noise Within's production of *Argonautika*.

Except for its mildly salacious parts, *Argonautika* does sometimes feel like a play and production designed for an audience of children; I kept expecting wooden swords that never materialized. This has a lot to do with the fairy-tale nature of myths, but it also lies in a surprising absence of poetic writing in Zimmerman's script, which, humor aside, remains pedestrian, perhaps because she had to tell this long and busy tale at a gallop to get it all in.

(To be fair, Zimmerman is perfectly capable of poetry, as evidenced in her 2013 play *TheWhite Snake*, seen in a seductive production at the San Diego Old Globe in 2015. Based on a heartbreaking ancient Chinese legend, it is filled with opportunities for exquisite visual as well as oral beauty.)

For all the reasons mentioned above, the rough and tumble *Argonautika* is more problematic. The rigorous ensemble playing it requires was still frayed at the performance I attended, but it will tighten up. Rodriguez-Elliott makes the most of Zimmerman's sly sense of comedy and it serves the production well. It will serve it even better as it goes along.

The cast of *Argonautika* at A Noise Within.

The other problem I hinted at earlier is a much deeper and broader issue than just how it affects this production (though that is deep enough), and it is rooted in the absence of rigorous vocal training for the stage that afflicts most younger American actors everywhere. It makes them seem more amateurish than they are, and in a cast this big, it can too often feel like everyone is speaking Valley Girl.

There are two easy-to-identify reasons for it: one is the (welcome) increased employment for actors in film and television, and the other is the increasing use of microphones on stage.

That actor training seems to no longer focus on projection and speech in its curriculum is a major and unnecessary loss and huge setback for young actors, especially women. For some time now, the speech of American women in general has been veering into a slovenly high-pitched nasal stratosphere that makes it unpleasantly shrill on the receiving end. We not only hear it too often on stage, but also among women anywhere, such as anchorpersons, guest TV pundits or even plain old living room, street or supermarket conversations. And it's not funny.

It suggests a form of spoken-language illiteracy, a failure of the ear and vocal cords that, for young actors of all genders, can leave them at a serious disadvantage. Unless they're cast to play Billie Dawn in *Born Yesterday*, where silly high pitch is required, the best roles will elude them. It may already be too late for this problem to receive the urgent remedy it deserves, but as with all good things, it's never too late to make a start.

"Speak the speech, I pray you, trippingly on the tongue…"

Top image: The cast of Argonautika *rowing away in A Noise Within's production.*

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: Argonautika

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 East Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107

WHEN: Check with the box office for dates & times, in person or by phone at 626.356.3121 or online at www.anoisewithin.org.

HOW: Tickets start at $25. **STUDENT RUSH** w/ID one hour before curtain, $20. **SUNDAY RUSH**: 7pm, 3/31 & 4/21, all remaining tickets available day-of-performance after 12am, with code *SUNDAYRUSH*. Also cash or credit at the box office day-of-performance after 2pm. **GROUPS (10 or more)**: Adults: $25-$50, up to 35%off. Students w/ID, from $18. Call 626.356.3121 & ask for Deborah Strang.

RUNNING TIME: 2 hours, 15 minutes with 1 intermission.

PARKING: Free in the adjacent Metro Line Parking Structure.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, March 27th, 2019 at 8:40 am and is filed under Theatre

You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.