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Theater Review

Hero gets a little help from his friends in "Jason and the Golden Fleece"

By Misha Berson

Seattle Times theater critic

Heroic quests may not be much in vogue in modern times, but the ancients idealized them. And they still can be enchanting — especially to the children among us.

The Seattle Children's Theatre production of "The Odyssey" was an absorbing hit in the 1990s. The company is now mounting a play based on the even earlier ancient Greek saga of Jason, and his hunt for the Golden Fleece.

Pared down to a size suitable for five actors and the compressed stage of SCT's Eve Alvord Theatre, John Olive's treatment of the 3,000-year-old tale cuts to the chase.

In brief: Jason (the usurped son of the king of Thessaly) swears to win his rightful place on the throne by obtaining the magical fleece of a golden ram.

He rounds up a couple sidekicks (far fewer than in most versions of the myth), readies a ship dubbed the Argo and sets sail with his "Argonauts" on an eventful sea voyage that tests their constancy and courage to the max.

Olive's "Jason and the Golden Fleece" conveys the myth in a cogent manner that works in some poetic allusions, but allows for little nuance in Lathrop Walker's stalwart portrayal of the eponymous hero.

And just shy of melodramatic are the performances by Renata Friedman (a nasal-voiced Orpheus), Shawn Telford (a brusque, comic Hercules), and Alexandra Tavares and Peter Crook (both tackling several roles).

The most enchanting element of the show, under the sure-handed direction by Rita Giomi, is the vivid stagecraft that adorns and amplifies the epic.

In Matthew Smucker's scenic design, draped sails are manipulated to unusual effect by ropes and pulleys. The tiled floor glows aquamarine (when the Argonauts are at sea), and green (when they're on terra firma).



enlarge CHRIS BENNION Shawn Telford, left, Lathrop Walker, Peter Crook and Renata Friedman in the Seattle Children's Theatre production of "Jason and the Golden Fleece."

Now playing

"Jason and the Golden Fleece," by John Olive, Fridays-Sundays through Nov. 26, Seattle Children's Theatre, Seattle Center; \$10-\$32 (206-441-3322 or www.sct.org).

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And a paneled wall glimpses far-away characters through windows that snap open and shut smartly.

Deb Trout's costumes also win the day. Most striking are those for Arachne (a woman transformed into a dangerous spider), the Hydra (a huge, loathsome reptile, played by a puppet) and the richly attired Medea (a sorceress-princess whom Jason weds, to his everlasting regret).

Ever notice that most of the heavies in this legend are females? What's that all about? But that's another play ...

SCT's "Jason and the Golden Fleece" does have a few scary creature-feature moments. But it's basically upbeat and suitable for those age 10 and above, with some straight-ahead messages about staying the course, believing in yourself and the power of stories.

For an entertaining adjunct to the play, you might want to rent the 1963 flick, "Jason and the Argonauts." It's a B-movie treat, with unforgettable stop-animation monsters designed by special-effects genius Ray Harryhausen.

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