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- Environment
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- People
- Health & Wellness
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- Seniors
- Youth Sports
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Imagination as the most special effect: SCT's minimalist 'Jason' finds the Golden Fleece

BY TOM KEOGH
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Shawn Telford as Hercules, Lathrop Walker as Jason, Peter Crook as Argos and Renata Friedman as Orpheus. Photo by Chris Bennion

What? No army of sword-wielding skeletons? No giant, living statue named Talos? No seven-headed hydra?

Well, fine. It's not Seattle Children's Theatre's fault that my idea of a dramatized "Jason and the Golden Fleece" is pretty much the spectacular, 1963 film "Jason and the Argonauts," with its thrilling music score by Bernard Herrmann and fantastic, stop-motion special effects by the great Ray Harryhausen. (During a recent appearance at Seattle's Science Fiction Museum, Harryhausen brought along one of those skeletons. It was about 5 inches tall - a real mind-blower. I fell in love with that special movie all over again.)

But, ahem, I digress. Let me put it this way: Don't expect centaurs in SCT's new "Jason and the Golden Fleece," or, for that matter, dragon teeth sprouting into soldiers, or tempting Sirens, or fire-breathing oxen, or any of the other sensational accessories that are a part of one or another ancient version of Jason's story. And that's just fine.

The play, an original by John Olive ("The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle"), is very much the antithesis of spectacle. Performed in the Eve Alford Theatre, a smallish, second stage at SCT, "Jason" is a condensed, abbreviated and revised take on the ancient myth, streamlined and softened for newcomers to the tale. There's literally no room on stage for the dozen-or-so exemplary heroes - the Argonauts - Jason legendarily took along with him on his amazing kingdom-to-kingdom journey from Thessaly to Colchis. Nor is there any way to suggest how big his ship, the Argo, is supposed to be.

Instead, Olive's Jason (Lathrop Walker), a murdered king's son bargaining for the throne by promising to steal the Golden Fleece for his paranoid uncle, Pelias (Peter Crook), only gets to bring along a couple of special companions. But what companions: a slightly goofy but honorable Hercules (Shawn Telford), and a young, ungainly but fascinating poet, Orpheus (Renata Friedman), some years before his misadventures with wife Eurydice.

As for the Argo, well, there's not much more than a moveable prow for a prop. The rest of "Jason"'s extremely spare set consists of billowy material that suggests the ship's sails or a canvas to cover the dead.

But director Rita Giomi ("The Shakespeare Stealer") makes the minimalism work in an intriguing way, calling attention to the artifice of the production, making the complex apparatus of an adapted myth part of the audience's experience of that myth.

Sure, I'm used to a fair amount of razzle-dazzle in SCT's biggest shows. But this "Jason" is a reminder that foundation myths of Western culture were once marvelously malleable in the hands of Homer, Plato, Ovid, Virgil and many other storytellers. Before there was a definitive story of the Argonauts, there were plenty of (sometimes contradictory) passes at pieces of Jason's story. Olive's rendition, in a production that even includes stagehands in the action (making no effort to be discreet as they vigorously push this and roll that), has the exciting feeling of something formative going on, intentionally unfinished.

Well, OK, there's a little razzle-dazzle. Alexandra Tavares, playing several parts as one of only five actors in the show, becomes the nasty harpy, a violent bird-woman, whose job is keeping blind prophet Phineus perpetually starving. There's also a great, hand-operated beastie protecting the Fleece. Most importantly, the audience's imagination is heavily tapped, as in a bracing scene in which actors Walker, Friedman and Telford do a convincing job, sans props, of sailing through the Symplegades, islands with huge rock cliffs that smash anything passing between them. You'd swear you can see those clashing walls with your own eyes.

"Jason and the Golden Fleece" loses a little steam in the second act. More accurately, it doesn't build a lot of resonance that might enhance Olive's message to kids that an individual's journey is often about the people one helps, and who help you, along the way. But, again, that incompleteness, a sense that "Jason" is a living, plastic legend, is really what makes this play feel alive.

Special mention must be made of Friedman's Orpheus, a wonderful performance that takes full advantage of the actress' ability to capture runaway brilliance in a precocious boy - a boy bewitched by, but not in control of, his Muse. Friedman's long, willowy frame molds itself into Orpheus' gangly uncertainty, particularly when she squats, like a frog on a lily pad, on the Argo's prow, clueless about what to do with her long arms and legs.

Kids who see "Jason" could easily walk away with an exciting, first reference point for Orpheus - hopefully the beginning of many discoveries about the character and all the known narratives and cults once built around him.

'Jason and the Golden Fleece'

Fridays-Sundays through Nov. 26 at Seattle Children's Theatre

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