

Holy chimera!

Collection of ancient allegories gets update on Little Theatre stage

Ancient epic gets fresh spin

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Nearly Naked Theatre's ambitious production of "Gilgamesh" is director Damon Dering's "Kill Bill" - a sprawling epic that borrows from several genres to achieve a weird, wonderful, rather unlikely masterpiece.

The play's story is taken from what's believed to be the world's oldest written myth: The Babylonian tale of the King of Uruk, a legendary ruler who is one-third man and two-thirds god. After accomplishing more than any mortal could (his kingdom fortified, his enemies defeated), Gilgamesh, played by David Weiss, submits himself to a Joseph Campbellian hero quest in which he must come to terms with that more humble one-third.

He meets his mortal match in the raised-by-animals Enkidu (Barry Finnegan) and, after becoming friends, they fight fantastic creatures together. Later, Gilgamesh wards off the advances of the sultry goddess Ishtar (Jenn Banda), resulting in the death of dear Enkidu, which hurtles Gilgamesh into a tragic lesson of his own mortality.

Lest the idea of an ancient hero story not sound like your cup of tea, playwright Andrew Ordover's 1995 script has taken generous liberties with its root text, injecting lots of comedy (Gilgamesh wakes from a nightmare, clutching his arms and saying, "Some god must have passed by ... My arms are numb with fear." Enkidu replies, "You slept on them.") and sharpening what could have been a sprawling mess into something grand but accessible.

The production is set on a stage (by T.J. Weltzien) that's an abstract blend of temple (whose façade becomes a god in the first act) and wilderness, with stone archways and flecks of green scattered about. It's the kind of set that would make Southwest Shakespeare Company jealous - and that's fitting, since several members of the fine cast, including Quetta Carpenter, Banda and Cale Epps, actually best their recent Southwest Shakespeare performances with this show. What sends this "Gilgamesh" over the top, though, are director Dering's bold genre-dabbling and stylish touches.

The story is told with a masked Greek chorus providing both narrative and the exotic cadre of supporting characters that Gilgamesh happens upon in his adventure. (I couldn't help but think of Woody Allen's "Mighty Aphrodite" in parts.) Creatures from simple birds and scorpion demons to the monster Humbaba are created from golden wire and cloth for a dreamy twist. As if that weren't enough, this "Gilgamesh" almost counts as a full-fledged musical - it's pocked with five catchy, somewhat rock-inspired interludes featuring music written and performed by Michael Bradley on classical guitar and sung by the Greek chorus.

Though the production is exotic and silly - a hermaphrodite with wings guides Gilgamesh to the front porch of two Jewish retirees from whom the king hopes to gain the gift of everlasting life, for example - it features some seriously fantastic acting. Weiss, toned and assertive, is a natural

hero. Finnegan is a well-nuanced wonder as the animalistic beast-man Enkidu, and his death scene is heartbreaking. But it's Banda who plays the powerhouse here, as the voluptuous goddess of love, roaring down the roof when her advances are scorned by Gilgamesh.

Those with more conservative or religious tastes might want to pass on Nearly Naked's show. For one thing, there's a scene of frontal nudity, and that scene is suggested to be a shame-of-nakedness myth that pre-dates that of Adam and Eve. Also, there's a myth of a Great Flood woven into the second act that similarly pre-dates that of the Pentateuch.

But if you're not bothered by any of that, you'll be richly rewarded by a lavish, quirky and entirely fun "Gilgamesh." There's a reason most theater companies wouldn't dare attempt such a large show, which makes the triumph of Dering and his humble company that much more impressive.