

Nashville Children's Theatre sets sail with Jason and the Argonauts, while the Bard wins *Shakespeare's Case*

Wild and Woolly

by MARTIN BRADY

In a culture that strays farther every year from its classical literary roots — see *Shakespeare's Case*, reviewed below — we can only applaud Nashville Children's Theatre for exposing its young audiences to Greco-Roman mythology, the fertile ground for many timeless plots. The company's first effort of the new year is a generally satisfying retelling of the rousing *Argonautica*, in which the great hero Jason attempts to reclaim his father's kingdom by embarking on an event-filled quest.

The depth and breadth of this centuries-old story, with its scheming gods, death-defying adventures and valiant mortals, can't all be covered here. But the versatile cast of five, directed by Scot Copeland, manages 13 characterizations and the essential episodes that take Jason and his Argonauts out to sea to face unearthly challenges.

Oracles, premonitions and prophecy set things in motion, with designer Erica Edmonson's stark scaffolding the focal point for most of the action. That modernist setpiece seems of a spirit with adaptor John Olive's updated dialogue, which is more colloquial than your typical antiquity-fest. Daniel Brewer's sound design mixes elements of industrial and prog rock to heighten the contemporary feel, while rear-projection video also makes an occasional appearance to further reflect the higher-tech approach to elemental myth.

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MICHAEL SCOTT EVANS

Eric D. Pasto-Crosby and Peter Vann in Jason and the Golden Fleece

JASON AND THE GOLDEN FLEECE

Presented by Nashville Children's Theatre
Through Feb. 6

As Jason, Eric D. Pasto–Crosby assumes the heroic stance always, and he swings his sword nobly and nimbly. Joseph Robinson provides a suitably robust physical representation of the legendary strong man Hercules, and when he's not performing brawny feats of machismo he's trading comic barbs with Peter Vann's Orpheus, the poet recording events for posterity.

Jamie Farmer and Bobby Wyckoff handle five roles apiece, zestily embodying such figures as (respectively) the fierce huntress Atalanta and Pelias, Jason's uncle, who gives him his quest and later betrays him. Farmer's sensual performance is highlighted by her turn as Medea, a character destined for her own classical tale of torment (not to mention the worst marriage this side of Edward Albee). She is outfitted beautifully in Patricia Taber's standout wine–red sorceress costume.

NCT recommends this production for kids 9 and up — and given the tale's darker elements, that target audience seems about right. Plus, younger children might be taxed by the sometimes brooding pacing, which makes the show feel longer than its 70–odd minutes.

Well–acquitted

Lucky for us, the Nashville Shakespeare Festival has disregarded Dick the Butcher's recommendation in *Henry VI, Part 2* to "kill all the lawyers." NSF's company original *Shakespeare's Case* remains a delight in this revival of its smash 2009 production, where students who've slogged through *Coriolanus* can witness their fondest hope: seeing its author hauled before a magistrate.

Co–authored by Nan Gurley, Denice Hicks and Claire Syler, the play remains essentially unchanged, as the audience serves as jury in a fantasy trial where the Bard defends himself against accusations that his works are boring and irrelevant in the modern day. Hicks is the judge and Gurley the prosecuting attorney, with Jon Royal playing the chief witness — an English teacher who sees the Bard as a curriculum killer who's no help at all boosting student scores in standardized testing.

This whimsical setup takes off when Brian Russell enters as the playwright, determined to offer contrary "evidence" in his favor. So embarks an evening of rich literary references, some lively improvisation — with funny knocks on "tweeting" and texting — and outtakes from classics like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, plus a piquant side trip through the many familiar aphorisms in the language courtesy of Shakespeare.

The cast, under the direction of Beki Baker, revels in the point–counterpoint, and they are well supported by 14–year–old Anwen Wilkerson, who accompanies the shenanigans — comic and otherwise — on fiddle, recorder, viola and bells, offering an amalgam of original

and familiar airs. Wilkerson even incorporates the theme from *Gilligan's Island* (which, who knows, might outlast some of the Bard's lesser plays).

Classy technical touches come courtesy of Anne Willingham's sumptuous lighting, Erica Edmonson's simple but useful stage decorations and June Kingsbury's costumes, which range from prosaic to mirthful to elegant. All's well that ends well: This jury finds in favor of *Shakespeare's Case* from start to finish.

Speaking of the start, the show's opener was magician Jason Michaels, whose deft prestidigitations are of the classical variety and are quite entertaining. Michaels shredded a newspaper before our very eyes, then disarmingly restored it to its original condition. He also successfully performed card and rope tricks and made oranges and balls cleverly (and mystically) disappear and reappear, while maintaining a charming rapport with his captive audience. It's fun to be fooled — especially by the likable, sure-handed Michaels.

Shakespeare's Case continues at Belmont's Troutt Theater through Jan. 30. Hie thee hence.

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