

## THINGS TO DO

# Theater review: A truly epic 'Odyssey' all over Angel Island



By **SAM HURWITT** | IJ correspondent

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If you're going to a theatrical adaptation of "The Odyssey," Homer's 2,800-year-old epic poem about Odysseus' 10 years lost at sea on the way home from the decade-long Trojan War, it seems fitting to have to board a boat. The San Francisco company We Players is in residence at Angel Island State Park, and its highly interactive theater piece involves a hike around the perimeter of the island that feels no less epic. But first you have to get there, catching a morning ferry from Tiburon or San Francisco.

Once on the island, the play goes on continuously from 10:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., although some of that time is spent trudging from location to another. There are no scheduled breaks, but the show provides plenty of opportunities to rest for a moment while the action goes on around you, plus a handy map in case you somehow get separated. You're encouraged to bring a lunch or buy one, but there are also moments when snacks or water are served as part of the play.

We Players specializes in site-specific theater in highly scenic locations, including a recent production of "Hamlet" on Alcatraz. Adapted and directed by founding artistic director Ava Roy, its "Odyssey" starts more or less where Homer's does, in Ithaca, where a crowd of boorish suitors have settled in during Odysseus' long absence, demanding that his wife, Penelope, choose a new husband from among them. Penelope's heroic son Telemachus, who was a baby when Odysseus left for Troy, goes off in search of his father to banish the rowdy suitors.

Unlike the original epic, however, this version stays with Telemachus' quest rather than catching up with Odysseus, and the son doesn't go anywhere that he actually went in the epic poem. Instead he and we visit various spots where Odysseus went and have similar encounters with the people he met, who say that whatever they're doing with us they just did with another guy who looked a lot like Telemachus.



These encounters feel like they're in no particular order, because the sequence is determined by the geography of the island rather than by narrative flow. If a cliff that would make a good Mount Olympus is near an old Army bunker reminiscent of the Cyclops' cave, those two scenes will be close together.

The cast of a dozen actors does a terrific job of peopling the island with at least 40-odd characters, abetted by a large acoustic band of wandering troubadours playing a jazzy score by Charlie Gurke. James Udom makes a noble and earnest young hero as Telemachus, good company for the journey despite the weighty matters on his mind. Libby Kelly is a sweet-voiced and melancholy Penelope, pining for her absent husband, and does a curious dance of seduction as a siren on a remote concrete ledge.

Nathaniel Justiniano is delightfully flighty as the wind-maker Aeolus and the great god Zeus, and unnervingly belligerent as a drunken beggar. Julie Douglas makes an elusive Athena and is intensely seductive as the witch Circe. Ross Travis is an amusingly louche fratboy-type as the messenger god Hermes. Michael Moerman has a rich, resonant voice as the orator Mentor and the ghostly prophet Tiresias, and Caroline Parsons is playfully flirtatious as the nymph Calypso. With numerous versatile costumes by Mariangel Roca, the ensemble does a fine job of transforming from brawling suitors to giddy winds, shambling ghosts to doting nymphs.

What's most impressive, however, is the sheer amount of audience interaction the actors do for hours on end. Udom's Telemachus chats with the crowd as we accompany him on his hike from place to place, asking for any news of his father and gamely answering questions. It's a truly immersive theatrical experience.

It helps a great deal to be familiar with "The Odyssey" in advance. It's not necessarily clear why Penelope looks like she's tugging on a rope, who the mysterious stranger is who tells Telemachus his father is alive, or why we're told that some seemingly harmless, placidly chanting priestesses (the Lotos-Eaters) are dangerous and we have to get away. (If you stick close to Telemachus during the retreat, however, he might tell you.)

If you don't know the story you won't learn it from Roy's atmospheric and impressionistic riff on the Homeric epic; the patchwork of experiences provides a tantalizing taste of the various stops along Odysseus' journey rather than a cohesive story. But it's tremendously rewarding as a holistic theatrical experience and as a unique and invigorating way of exploring Angel Island. Even unrelated hikers may become part of the experience, cheering you on in your search for Odysseus. The destination is almost beside the point; this trip is all about the journey.

Sam Hurwitt's theater blog, The Idiolect, is at [www.the idiolect.com](http://www.theidiolect.com). Contact him at [shurwitt@gmail.com](mailto:shurwitt@gmail.com) or on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/shurwitt>.



REVIEW

What: "The Odyssey"

Where: Angel Island State Park

When: Through July 1: 10:30 a.m. weekends and some Fridays

Tickets: \$40 to \$75

Information: 547-0189, [www.weplayers.org](http://www.weplayers.org)

Rating: \*\*\*H I

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