

The Performant: Traveler's tales | SF Arts

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The WE Players' courageous Odyssey on Angel Island

It's an overcast morning, typical San Francisco springtime, but upon disembarking from the Angel Island ferry at Ayala Cove, we are transported imaginatively to the island kingdom of Ithaca, where a merry band of brash suitors vie for the attentions of the fair Penelope (Libby Kelly) outside her palace, which might have otherwise been mistaken for the Angel Island visitor's center.

A bevy of serving girls approach each disoriented oddience member to offer sustenance and mysterious smiles, as the suitors challenge a stalwart few to join in the contests for Penelope's hand -- tug-of-war, footraces, pushing competitions. So begins the WE Players newest production "[The Odyssey on Angel Island](#)," an all-day performance combining the elements of a hero's quest with a day hike around [Angel Island State Park](#) -- one of the Bay Area's loveliest natural treasures.

It takes a while for the real action to begin, and the suitors' rambunctious ardor begins to seem wearisome, but finally Telemachus (James Udom), Odysseus' son makes the scene, the catalyst behind what will become our mutual quest. Although "The Odyssey" is best remembered as being the tale of the protracted homecoming of Odysseus, Telemachus' own journey and coming-of-age story is an important piece of the epic tale, therefore it's his footsteps that we wind up following in around the island, as he searches for news of his long-lost father, who hasn't been seen in Ithaca for nineteen long years.

Two distinguishing characteristics of the WE Players stand out in this ambitious performance project. One is their truly ingenious use of space, including both the natural and the man-made features of the island. A breeze-buffed meadow outside the historic Camp Reynolds stands in for the land of Aeolus, "warden of wind" (Nathaniel Justiniano), a dramatic ridge along the perimeter road serves as Mount Olympus, and the dank and crumbling Batteries Wallace and Drew become the hypnotically creepy Land of the Lotos-Eaters and the cave of the Cyclops, respectively. The brooding ruined barracks of the East Garrison serve double duty as the palace of Circe (Julie Douglas) and the underworld home of the prophet Tiresias (Michael Moerman), while the soft, sugary sands of Quarry Beach beckon the weary traveler to bask in Calypso's (Caroline Parsons) treacherous thrall.

The second distinctive WE Players characteristic on display is the intersection of slapstick physical comedy and elegant ritual. While humorously exaggerated characters such as Justiniano's dim-witted, corporate executive Zeus and Ross Travis' vain and petulant Hermes elicit more laughter than fealty from their mortal subjects, the beguiling dance of a drifting siren (Libby Kelly), the soporific sacrifice of the Lotos-Eaters, and a protection ceremony enacted by a cluster of nymphs on sacred ground (a former military chapel) create a meditative bond between performers and participants.

However, as the day progresses, it becomes apparent that the overall experience could use less ritualized downtime during each performed segment, and a more non-programmed downtime in between scenes for more self-direction (and, honestly, snack breaks). It would make the languid pace of the quieter scenes seem more deliberately introspective than as ways to fill time until the last ferry, and allow Telemachus' "stalwart crew" more opportunities to connect independently to the themes of travel, duty, heroism, and homecoming presented by the players (along with bread and cheese) on a silver platter.

But you won't see a play this summer with better views or loftier ambitions, guaranteed, and when the sky finally clears, and Helios shows his face at last, you do get the feeling that the gods are watching over the long journey home.