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# 'The Odyssey on Angel Island State Park' review

THEATER REVIEW

By **Chad Jones**

May 15, 2012





James Udom as Telemachus travels to the land of the dead.

Mark Kitaoka

**POLITE APPLAUSE****The Odyssey on Angel Island State Park:** Site-specific drama.

Adapted and directed by [Ava Roy](#). Through July 1. Presented by We Players, Angel Island State Park and Angel Island Conservancy. On Angel Island State Park, beginning at Ayala Cove. 5 1/2 hours. \$40-\$75. (415) 547-0189. [www.weplayers.org](http://www.weplayers.org).

As stages go, Angel Island ranks among the most beautiful in the world. That this gem of a state park is known more for hiking and biking and less for hosting great drama could be changing.

Thanks to We Players, the enterprising, site-specific troupe that staged "Hamlet" on Alcatraz in 2010, Angel Island is the centerpiece of an extraordinary 5 1/2-hour experience called "The Odyssey on Angel Island State Park."

This "Odyssey," adapted by director Ava Roy from [Homer's](#) epic about Odysseus and the 10 years it took him to return home after the Trojan War, shifts the focus from the father to the son.

Arriving on a ferry either from San Francisco or Tiburon, audiences are immediately swept up into the action at the visitor center, which is now standing in for Ithaca and the home of Odysseus' tormented wife, Penelope ([Libby Kelly](#)), and son, Telemachus ([James Udom](#)).

Visitors are welcomed with bowls of almonds and onions and invited to join the throng of suitors vying for Penelope's hand by participating in wrestling matches and tugs-of-war. A nine-piece band, complete with a horn section, makes Ithaca fe

theatrical terms, it's an earnest cross between an improv exercise and a Renaissance Pleasure Faire.

When the play begins in earnest, it becomes clear that Telemachus, played with charming sincerity by Udom, is the hero of this journey. He begins a quest to find his father, so the audience (a group of about 50 at Saturday's opening performance) sets out in Odysseus' footsteps in the hope that we'll catch up with him eventually.

The trek covers several miles, most of it on paved paths, with the inevitable uphill challenges, but the We Players reward the effort with a beautifully executed production, the logistics of which must be dauntingly complex as actors, musicians and equipment are shuttled all over the island well ahead of the audience's arrival at each of the 14 stops.

An early stop is Aiolia, home of Aeolus, king of the winds (played with breezy charm by Nathaniel Justiniano). Hikers descend into Camp Reynolds, with its startlingly beautiful vistas of the bay, the Golden Gate Bridge and Sausalito. Sandwiches and fruit are served before the action shifts indoors for a simulated ocean voyage.

## Trims needed

Many of Roy's scenes could use some trimming, and as delightful as the journey is, the actual story grows slack more often than it should. The interlude in the Land of the Lotus Eaters, for instance, is briefly interesting but grows monotonous as its function in the narrative is lost.

The mood picks up on Mount Olympus (a dramatic jutting rock that actually feels worthy of the gods), one of the play's few comic scenes, and things get even better when, at a crossroads, audience members are given a choice that boils down to heroic, passively heroic or lazy routes. Unless you want to navigate a complex obstacle course that simulates the perils of Scylla and Charybdis, go for the second op

the heroes meet their challenges is a highlight of the day.

More food and drink await at [Temenos](#) before Circe ([Julie Douglas](#)) works her spells on Telemachus and sends him into the [House of the Dead](#). Again, Angel Island and its crumbling buildings are the perfect backdrop and all but upstage the story.

## Calypso a hoot

A penultimate scene involving Calypso (a funny [Caroline Parsons](#)), a beach party on a gorgeous beach and the god Hermes (Ross Travis) in a speedboat is a hoot, but then the actual ending – back in Ithaca via trams – is a disappointment. Roy's commitment to Telemachus robs the weary wanderers of the ending they deserve, and the "happy" ending feels forced.

Even if the dramatics falter, there's no denying that the natural spectacle of Angel Island and the impeccable production by the sturdy We Players crew make this an "Odyssey" worth experiencing.

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