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"The Odyssey": Ship Sails Through the Bay While Giving a Show

By **Lily Janiak** Wednesday, Sep 28 2011

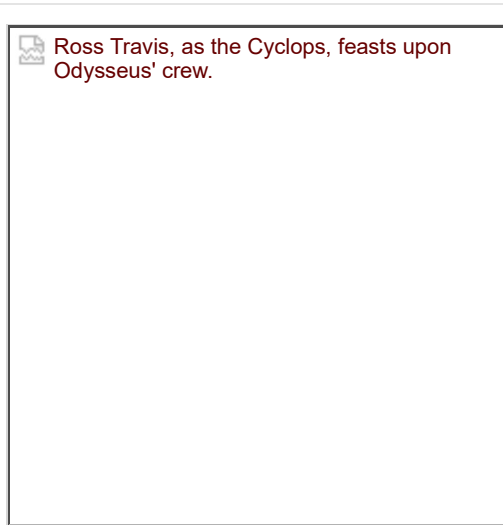
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When you board the *Alma* at the **Hyde Street Pier**, summoned by the call of a conch shell and wearing your special audience-member sash, it's easy to imagine the pier-bound, mouth-agape tourists already concocting the stories they'll tell about how San Franciscans behave in their native habitat: "And then a bunch of them started saying 'I am Odysseus!'"

Set aboard a historic schooner and staged as the craft sails the **San Francisco Bay**, We Players' new adaptation of *The Odyssey* exemplifies how, in theater, the marriage of text with place can reinvigorate both. **Ava Roy's** inventive production makes for a singular experience.

The only schooner of its kind still afloat in the United States, the *Alma*, built in 1891, boasts the kind of mechanisms you could imagine Odysseus operating: massive iron cranks; wooden rings that slide up its masts to hoist its three sails. As you cast off, it's almost impossible to tell who's an actor and who's a member of the crew. All wear a uniform (a gray utility jumpsuit), all join

 Ross Travis, as the Cyclops, feasts upon Odysseus' crew.






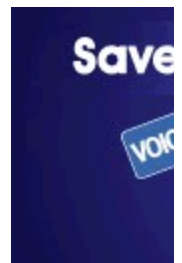
Mark Kitaoka

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in singing sea shanties, and all help prepare the vessel for voyage. Their crisp, nimble movements, as they twist a rope into perfect coils or, machine-like, coordinate their strength to raise a sail, are a show in their own right.

Even once the story begins in earnest, the sailing remains central to the artistry, lending a counterweight of solemnity to a production that otherwise takes an irreverent attitude toward the text. The company has adapted books nine through 12 of Homer's epic, the ones that include the man-eating Cyclops, the temptress Circe and her drug-laced wine, and the sirens whose singing is so seductive that Odysseus must tie himself down to bear it. We Players emphasize some preposterous language (as when Odysseus hoists himself under a sheep's "kinky belly") and deliver the lines as though they can barely countenance the absurdity themselves.

Roy's physically rigorous staging ensures this humor never becomes gratuitous. The ensemble members ([Ali Hanson](#), [Rebecca Longworth](#), [Geoffrey Nolan](#), [Ross Travis](#), and Roy) use slapstick hijinks and direct appeals to the audience to create distinct personalities — the scaredy-cat, the improbable he-man — whose competition for status both engages and helps guide us through passages of difficult language. Their considerable acrobatic talents are also put to scene-setting purposes: They conjure tempestuous waves by tumbling over one another in an almost kaleidoscopic pattern, and create the "kingdom of the dead" by clumping together and then slowly wheezing and writhing.

Ross Travis' Cyclops is a comic marvel. Squatting and licking his lips behind a mask reminiscent of [Toxic Avenger](#), he lasciviously pets (and milks!) a stuffed-animal lamb, gulps down [Barbie dolls](#), and vomits all over the audience.

When the company veers from comedy, the trumped-up physicality feel overwrought. The underworld scene struggles for focus: Each ghost spews prophesy (and fake blood) for minutes on end before galumphing through his own ponderous death scene.

Thankfully, We Players mostly play to their strengths. For Roy, the bay is a stage with unique constraints. She knows exactly when to take advantage of calmer waters and when to let actors

Through Nov. 18 at Hyde Street Pier, S.F. \$160; 547-0189 or www.weplayers.org.

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and audience mingle and enjoy the scenery. Her devices complement the bay or arise naturally from it: The music, by **Charlie Gurke**, uses flute, drum, and cymbal to merge with and amplify the ambient maritime noise, so that his "sound effects" initially seem to come from the surroundings. Even more magically, characters pop out from impossible places — the top of the mast, overboard, on shore — as though Odysseus' gods were intervening here.

Emerging from this production, you can't help but perceive the bay differently. As commandeered by We Players, it's a puzzle, an eternal variable, a dynamic body of water navigable only by skilled craftsmen, a threat to smooth performance, a site for an interesting one, and an obstacle to homecoming. Poseidon lurks always in We Players' vision of the bay — but so does drama.

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