

Evocative scenes, slight story in ‘Beowulf’

By Jean Schiffman
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Dana Iova-Koga appears in “Beowulf.” (Courtesy Lauren Matley)

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So many disparate and brilliant elements comprise We Players’ new, site-integrated, multidisciplinary version of “Beowulf” that it’s almost an embarrassment of riches.

There’s the beauty of San Francisco’s marina, misty and ethereal on opening night as the audience (dressed, per request, in black, to honor the recent death of the warrior Beowulf) trudged silently from the initial gathering place, the Maritime Museum, up a verdant hill.

Along the route, ghostly figures, representing the era of the Old English epic poem, set in Denmark, upon which the production is based, waft by in furs, capes and hoods. Among them are the men of the Rova Saxophone Quartet, who provide eerie and at times thrilling accompaniment throughout.

In a quiet meadow Ava Roy (We Players’ artistic director and co-creator of “Beowulf” along with Shinochi Iova-Koga, founder-artistic director of the dance-theater troupe inkBoat) explains, in sepulcher tones, how the community has forgotten its connection to history and past dangers — a hint that this “Beowulf” might relate to modern times.

By the time the audience arrives at the chapel at Upper Fort Mason (the “mead hall”) for the bulk of the performance, the thread has dissipated.

This is a different, ancient-feeling world (the creators used various textual sources in creating it), lit partly by lamps, candles and chandelier, most of the action set on a platform in between two halves of audience (which is seated on pews).

In picking out choice bits of the Beowulf tale (in which the hero, among other feats, saves his people by cutting off the arm of the dragon Grendel), the creators mix characters from the poem (including Grendel and his mother) with generalized non-characters and stitch it all together with a non-linear narrative.

InkBoat’s physical theater work is riveting (Shinichi Iova-Koga is a croaky-voiced, mesmerizing Grendel), as are the performances of the ensemble: Roy, inkBoat’s Dana Iova-Koga and reliably strong We Players regular Nathaniel Justiniano. And the score, by We Players music director Charlie Gurke (who’s also on sax) and Rova, is wonderfully unsettling.

But the text is largely banal, mostly consisting of disconnected, faux-profound utterances with occasional modern-sounding dialogue (“Have empathy! Yes, Grendel did eat humans. He was trying to make do”).

This is a hypnotically slow-moving theatrical experience that may captivate some, frustrate others.

Says one character, “This is the moment when words matter.” Unfortunately, this environmentally inclusive “Beowulf” is all atmosphere in search of a story.

REVIEW

Beowulf

Presented by We Players, inkBoat and Rova Saxophone Quartet

Where: Aquatic Park and Fort Mason’s Chapel, 1100 Bay St., S.F.

When: Sunset, Thursdays through Sundays; closes April 16

Tickets: \$30 to \$80

Contact: (415) 547-0189, weplayers.org