

Heromonster pushes theatre to frightening boundaries

Juan De Anda

Tucked away among the buildings comprising San Francisco's Fort Mason Center, a struggle between good and evil begins to rise within the hallowed ground of the fort's military chapel, just at the moment when the sun begins to set.

As spectators are welcomed into the World War II-era building, they are instructed to sit around the pews circling a large rectangular table that also doubles as a stage. The cast-iron doors creak to a banging closure and another world unfolds.

HEROMONSTER

Presented by We Players

Where: Fort Mason Center Chapel, near Bay and Franklin streets

When: This Wed. to Sun., through Nov. 1

Tickets: \$45

Contact: (415) 345-7575 www.fortmason.org

For a limited time, We Players is staging *Heromonster*, a modern and original production, which takes the early English poem Beowulf as its inspiration and launching point. Created and starring Ava Roy and Nathaniel Justiniano, the theatre piece shines a light on the themes of monstrosity and heroism that exist throughout society, but often times, within the same individual.

The San Francisco-based theatre company is known for creating large-scale, site specific works, where the location itself transforms to be an integral and essential part of each play's storyline. Examples include Shakespeare's *Macbeth* at Fort Point underneath the Golden Gate Bridge, and Homer's *The Odyssey* at Angel Island.

In *Heromonster*, the storyline is equally as epic and is faithful to the group's style of collapsing the fourth wall; however, this staging is departure for a We Players play.

Roy, who serves as founder and creative director, told SFBay she felt it was time to push the boundaries of theatre, especially with narrating source material:

“Back in the beginning of the year, I knew I wanted to work with Beowulf, but I didn't know what form it would be presented in. As Nathaniel and I explored the poem and other source materials, it became clear to us that we would create a new original work where it would be smaller and the narration nonlinear, but the feeling would still be communal.”



The show is a little over an hour long and only three actors are employed, which include saxophonist and composer Charlie Gurke. Roy and Justiniano perform an intense poetic interchange for the duration of the showcase, sometimes melodic and often times passionate, while also doing acrobatic sprints throughout the petite chapel.

And there is no hard finish, nor traditional bow, and the audience is beckoned to come around the banquet table and nibble on bread and cheese, thus signaling the end of the work.

Justiniano, who also wrote and stars in the production, said a vital aspect of his and Roy's staging was the aftershow, which he considers a pivotal development in every audience member's interpretation:

“There is no one right way to view the work and all views are equally valid. At the end, you see a wide spectrum of reactions from confusion to anger to bewilderment.”

Justiniano added:

The audience is given a dense hour and half exchange between Ava and I and the exchanging to food and opinions is where the play develops, branches out further into something else, which is perfectly fine.”

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Place acts as a character and the Chapel serves as Beowulf’s Mead Hall, a setting which functions as cultural institution providing warmth and camaraderie. For We Players, The Chapel isn’t just a literal interpretation of the Mead Hall but acts a portal through which time and space collapse, and the play puts a spotlight on juxtaposing opposing elements, according to Roy:

“I loved the Fort Mason Chapel for its architecture and its decor. Here you have a chapel that is a gathering place and refuge for those seeking serenity but the windows have strong military motifs of power and strength and destruction: which harks on the question: How do we balance opposing forces in our lives?”

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Provoking questions are asked throughout: Which is bigger monstrosity? To have fangs and horns or to not be able to love? Which little acts contribute to human heroism or monstrosity, and who deems them so? One thing that Roy and her cohorts agree with is that there are no clear answers and that questions will often times, simply be the answer one is left with.

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