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We Players bring heroes, monsters to life



Ava Roy and Nathaniel Justiniano appear in "Heromonster," an invigorating performance piece inspired by the Old English epic poem "Beowulf." (Courtesy Lauren Matley)

By Leslie Katz on October 15, 2015 12:15 am



Three dynamic performers comprise "Heromonster," a one-of-kind production, both earthly and other-worldly, in the chapel at San Francisco's Fort Mason Center.

The piece is the latest creation from We Players, best known for large-cast, site-specific shows inspired by classics in wide outdoor expanses. ("Ondine," based on a French and German tale of

The equally appealing "Heromonster," however, takes a more intimate tack, with just three artists: We Players' founder Ava Roy, Nathaniel Justiniano, and saxophonist-composer Charlie Gurke.

The trio fills the World War II-era chapel, which doubles as the mead hall in the Old English epic, "Beowulf," which is the inspiration, rather than literal basis, for the wet and wild piece.

Audience members (who sit on pews around a long banquet table that more or less serves as the stage), however, need not have special knowledge of Anglo-Saxon history or literature to appreciate "Heromonster."

They should be prepared to be part of a communal experience in the hall.

At the outset, the actors (playing both heroes and monsters, but not specific characters in a linear story), even introduce a few guests in period fashion, asking them to name their ancestors.

At one point, they invite: "You are welcome here; in your honor, we drink," and bottles of quite high-octane mead are passed around.

And even though the lights never go down, all attention remains on the mesmerizing Roy and Justiniano, who act out seemingly every human emotion in a series of confrontations and pairings, portraying aggressors and prey.

They recite poetic, rapid dialogue, sometimes in unison, sometimes in exchanges. Sometimes there's chanting.

Clothed in knee-length pants, and bandage-like tops, they dance, fight, connect with, and yes, abuse each other. A large white swath of cloth, which flows, billows, twists and ties, serves almost as a third character.

A hilarious, sort of anachronistic segment has the heroes (or are they monsters?) blowing up balloons, attaching them to their bodies while they one-up each other, sounding like politicians as they boast — before they pop the balloons on each other.

Gurke, wearing a monk-like brown robe, provides musical accompaniment throughout: sometimes the saxophone is jarring and blears, sometimes it's haunting and melodic.

By the end of the just-over-an-hour experience, meat is eaten, blindfolds are employed, and both characters have submerged their head in a bowl of water.

Along the way, provocative questions are asked: What's worse — to feel or not to feel? And, how can I be more loving to you?

At the show's conclusion, after farewells are bid, the dining table is filled with a real banquet. In a lovely epilogue to complete the exhilarating group experience, visitors are invited break bread with the actors and each other.

REVIEW

Heromonster

Presented by We Players

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

When: 6:30 p.m. Oct. 15-16, Oct. 18, Oct. 22-25, 6:15 p.m. Oct. 29-31, 5:15 p.m. Nov. 1

Tickets: \$45

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