

Beowulf... but cool

An epic poem as reconceived by Banana Bag & Bodice



By Matthew Love April 7, 2009

A decapitated head rests upside down in a fish tank. A Viking helmet, horns askew, is propped high atop a boom pole. Abandoned soda cans, coffee cups, coats, and playing cards sit beside a plastic *Star Wars* monster frozen in mid-rampage. Two bodies lie crashed out on blue seat cushions in the risers. All in all, these subdued yet chaotic hints are clear: This rehearsal space, not unlike King Hrothgar's disheveled mead hall in the story, is a perfectly warped womb ready to belch forth an epic hero called Beowulf.

The theater collective Banana Bag & Bodice has been creating and polishing its rock-opera adaptation of the epic Norse poem for more than a year now. It's still a week before *Beowulf's* New York opening (on April 1), so the players are rehearsing onstage, calibrating choreography and fine-tuning their characters. Though the show has already played to critical acclaim and sold-out houses in San Francisco (where it was commissioned), opening in Banana Bag & Bodice's adopted hometown seems to hold out somewhat higher stakes.

One of this project's foremost challenges may be convincing jaded audiences of the *Beowulf* source material, an idea BB&B acknowledges in the show's subtitle: "1000 Years of Baggage." Since the poem's first transcription, many 14-year-olds have been dryly force-fed this piece of aged literature. BB&B expects, almost relishes, the audience's skeptical presumptions.

"Everyone has to read [*Beowulf*] without understanding why," says Jessica Jelliffe, who, along with Jason Craig, makes up the core of BB&B. "You read this weird, boring poem in Old English and you dissect it, but there's no visceral understanding of what it's about."

Provoking visceral understandings is in the troupe's genetic makeup. Creators of a claustrophobic dystopia that Terry Gilliam would have been proud of (*The Sewers*), a staged oil rig on which they posed as a functional rock band (*The Rise And Fall Of The Rising Fallen*), and a musical about a sandwich (*Sandwich*), BB&B has made a name for itself over the last 10 years by creating unique and disorienting worlds that audiences feel comfortable enough to climb inside of. The company hopes *Beowulf's* broader accessibility will widen its fan base even more.

One indicator that BB&B's desire for more populist entertainment trumps any cloistered, mental machinations: Craig, the scriptwriter, didn't rush to even read the poem. "I interviewed people who had read it, got their impression of it," he says. "After a long time I broke down and read the Cliff Notes." Composer Dave Malloy, whose influences for the score range from The Andrews Sisters to Dirty Projectors, read it but "skimmed the third part." If this crew's disinterest in analysis weren't clear enough, the show's action is framed by a panel of stodgy academics, who not only blather about the poem's implications but also become the monsters that Beowulf must vanquish.

However, director Rod Hipkind is quick to point toward "the power of the original narrative and the importance of the oral tradition." While on the West Coast, the troupe performed one night in a warehouse with no set and little stage space to speak of while 180 people sat on the floor. Jelliffe recounted the performance as a revelatory look into "storytelling the way it was then: There was fire and there was beer and this guy would tell the story with his lyre and it was a party. That's the essence of what's in this show, that raucous storytelling extravaganza." To help, the producers have employed lots of unorthodox tools to help the story go down easy: dancing warrior girls, an underwater battle performed in a fish tank, and free beer during the first week of the run.



Rumbling underneath all of that is BB&B's exhilarating sense of tonal fluidity. In its *Beowulf*, the monster Grendel is undoubtedly a monster, but he's also a mentally challenged mama's boy. A bouncy, accordion-powered mead-hall song features King Hrothgar jokingly lamenting his failures and waning sanity with lots of liquor and pants-pissing. After a revealing emotive belch, the music quickly slips from levity as Hrothgar pleads like a little boy, "I need Beowulf! I need Beowulf! I need Beowulf!"

It's easy to imagine how this, along with a couple of dancing warrior girls and a severed head, might be the grand chaos needed to flush any ugly *Beowulf* associations from the aged 14-year-olds among us.

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