

BANANA BAG AND BODICE

PRESS QUOTES FROM, BEOWULF: A THOUSAND YEARS OF BAGGAGE

"This is our mead hall, Heorot. Welcome to our mead hall, please,' sings King Hrothgar in this joyfully raucous and silly music-filled play about Beowulf, Grendel, and company by the theatre group Banana Bag and Bodice. The piece takes the form of an academic panel discussing the ancient legend, along with scenes boisterously acted out in full fur-and-helmets rock-opera mode. The propulsive, oompah-inflected music, by Dave Malloy (who also has the role of Hrothgar and plays the accordion), brings out the power and the color of the legend, and the performers are uniformly entertaining, from the backup-singing warriors (Shaye Troha and Anna Ishida) to Jason Craig, the playwright, as Beowulf, and, especially, Jessica Jelliffe, as Grendel's savvy, lake-dwelling mother."

-The New Yorker

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"Sorry, classicists: Banana Bag & Bodice's rocked-up riff on the epic poem deviates from the foundational Anglo-Saxon text. And yet, for much of its two hours, it does faithfully present the skeletal events of Beowulf through Dave Malloy's growly Tom Waits-esque tunes and Craig's lyric-naive text, which uses repetitions and studied verbal stumbling to undercut the bloody, ritualized narrative. Craig also weaves in (slightly on-the-nose) observations about matriarchal versus patriarchal psychology, the slippery-slope ethics of fighting terrorists and the role of violence in art. If those concepts don't do it for you, there's always a good stomping rock number and a stylized ass-kicking coming soon...Seeing this cracked Beowulf may not earn students extra credit, but it's an irresistible excuse to cut class."

-David Cote, Time Out New York

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"'Beowulf' is a fairly odd tale as originally written, what with all the devourings and dismemberings. But the surgery being administered to it at the Abrons Arts Center transforms it into something well beyond odd; something almost unprocessable...the rollicking incongruity of this production from the Bay Area sends the brain into a sort of does-not-compute mode. Maybe it's the combination of legendary monster-killer and klezmer music...a thrashing, bashing rendition of the 'Beowulf' story...Mr. Craig is hilariously revenge-of-the-nerdy as Beowulf, his heroic posturing notably at odds with his paunch and his glasses. It's all done to music (composed by Dave Malloy) that demands to be described as demented...And who would have thought that a production as full of noise as this one could end on a note approaching poignancy? It's the last surprise in a play full of them."

-Neil Genzlinger, New York Times

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"...a brilliant musical score composed by Dave Malloy (who also directs the music and plays the role of the good though wimpy King Hrothgar). In wonderfully cacophonous arrangements for blaring trombones, booming percussion, wild guitar, and wailing horns and viola, Malloy's songs not only capture the raw, primitive sensibilities of the story's eighth-century Scandinavian setting and characters but also underline subtle elements of the drama through amusing use of familiar musical genres -- hard rock, traditional Middle Eastern tunes, rap, Broadway, 1960s folk, and vocal jazz. Much of the music is sung by Ishida and Troha as a 'chorus' of two warriors who represent all the armies in the story. They sing beautifully, with electrifying belts, in both tender solo passages and tight harmonies."

-Lisa Jo Sagolla, Back Stage

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"An offbeat musical extravaganza...a successful fusion of rock and non-narrative theater. Credit for that goes to composer Dave Malloy, whose anthemic, bruising score is jubilantly performed by a sprawling onstage orchestra of brass, strings, piano, accordion, guitar, drums and saw...ultimately, it's Malloy's score that makes this worth your 20 bucks; songs like the Ramones-esque 'Body' and the Weill-inspired 'Hrothgar' are foot-stomping winners, and the virtuoso penultimate number, 'Olde English,' deserves to become the iPod generation's 'Pirate Jenny.'"

-John Del Signore, Gothamist

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"The music by Dave Malloy (who also offers a compelling turn as Hrothgar, the old Danish king who first calls on our hero to vanquish the monster terrorizing his land) is one of the work's highlights -- as the score takes a joyful romp through klezmer, indie rock, Kurt Weill, and New Orleans jazz, among other genres. The opening number is a Tom Waits-inspired piece that seizes the stage from the dry academics and tosses us into the center of the action...and just wait for Beowulf's first entrance, a fun mix of punk, droll narrative, and Elvis-like swagger."

-Andy Buck, TheaterMania

Beowulf: A Thousand Years of Baggage, now being co-presented by the Berkeley-based Shotgun Players and New York's Banana Bag & Bodice at the Abrons Arts Center, is a rock opera that bills itself as a "songplay." And while it first seems to be the goal of this production to rediscover the passion and energy that drew early Medieval listeners to the original story, the troupes are less interested in recreating Beowulf, or looking for great meaning in it, than they are in simply creating art and having a lot of fun doing it. And they largely succeed on their own terms.

The show begins with three academic critics (Beth Wilmurt, Jessica Jelliffe, and Christopher Kuckenbaker) who are seen from the waist up offering dry, banal analysis of the legendary tale of monster-slaying. Lo and behold, through the course of the evening, the monsters themselves are portrayed by these selfsame critics. Something tells me that a statement is being made here -- and it's a legitimate one, since few could argue that the great epic poem has long been weighed down by blood-draining critique.

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the action. If the song isn't as delightfully dangerous as Waits can be, it nevertheless has heads in the audience bobbing.

And just wait for Beowulf's first entrance, a fun mix of punk, droll narrative, and Elvis-like swagger. Portrayed by Jason Craig (who is also the show's librettist and lyricist), this Beowulf is a lovable lug who doesn't cut the most heroic figure in his horn rims and quasi-animal hide. But he will rise to the occasion, especially if you call him stupid.

Meanwhile, the two performers with the best rock voices, Anna Ishida and Shaye Troha, back up the action as miscellaneous warriors and also provide some catchy choreography to go with it all. The entire company is listed as the designer of the set, which is dominated by a bank of 30 box fans topped by a gnarly section of chain-link fence. (The fans come in handy when dramatic wind effects are called for.) And five fish tanks are plopped onstage to assist with the telling of the underwater battle sequences. Clearly, the emphasis here is not on high-budget thrills -- and luckily, they're not needed.

-Andy Buck, TheaterMania

"The music, by recent Jonathan Larson award-winner Dave Malloy (who also plays King Hrothgar), is wonderful- it feels a bit like Weill, with those swinging trombones, but has the power of rock and roll behind it. Like the text, the music also does not shy away from strange and unusual modes of expression...Craig is a hoot as the overblown hero and Malloy makes a fine impression as Hrothgar. The academics each get their moment to shine, with some amazing standout moments. Anna Ishida and Shaye Troha, as the Warriors, practically aerobicize through the play, while belting at the tops of their lungs. It's a very intriguing and very funny play. It's worth a look, and several hours of after-show debate."

-Duncan Pflalster, Broadway World

When most people think of Beowulf, they don't think of musical theatre. They most likely don't think of rock music, mtv choreography, or humor. If anything, they might remember other people's adaptations of the story (Neil Gaiman's recent CGI film comes to mind), or studying the dusty tale in English class.

And this is what makes Jason Craig's text for Beowulf: A Thousand Years of Baggage so interesting- not merely a retelling of the tale of a man fighting monsters, it becomes the story of a cultural icon fighting the historical critics who want to define and explicate him.

The play begins with three academics (Christopher Kuckenbaker, Jessica Jelliffe, and Beth Wilmurt) sitting down to present a panel or lecture on Beowulf. They all are very pleased with themselves and their knowledge of their topic (although they all contradict each other), until the feedback from their microphones begins to morph into an overture and they themselves become characters in the tale.

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The author also plays Beowulf in an inspired turn, his large-but-doughy glasses-and-leather physique contrasting with the academics' description of the man, allowing the audience to create their own Beowulf in that contrasting mental space. The script is fascinating- Charles Ludlam once said that the verbal tricks of Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* frightened the literary world into years of naturalism and minimalism- here Craig delivers a new and poetic language composed of repetition, tautology, current slang, Middle English, and profanity. His story takes unexpected turns and entertains while making a very clear point about the reductive power of criticism.

The music, by recent Jonathan Larson award-winner Dave Malloy (who also plays King Hrothgar), is wonderful- it feels a bit like Weill, with those swinging trombones, but has the power of rock and roll behind it. Like the text, the music also does not shy away from strange and unusual modes of expression. Sometimes the volume of the music makes it difficult to understand the words (CDs sold in the lobby are more coherent), which detracts from the theatrical experience. The show is also presented at the Abrons Arts Center Henry Street Settlement, which, while a lovely proscenium stage, distances the audience a bit from the action, precluding a more visceral reaction to the show.

The cast is quite impressive. Craig is a hoot as the overblown hero and Malloy makes a fine impression as Hrothgar. The academics each get their moment to shine, with some amazing standout moments. Anna Ishida and Shaye Troha, as the Warriors, practically aerobicize through the play, while belting at the tops of their lungs. It's a very intriguing and very funny play. It's worth a look, and several hours of after-show debate.

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BERKELEY REVIEWS:

"...delightfully, unpredictably quirky on all levels. Those include Malloy's score, which often sounds like indie-rock Kurt Weill but finds room for hints of klezmer, ramalama punk and near-normal showtune, with adventuresome arrangements encompassing everything from dual trombones to whistling and musical saw...has the makings of a cult (if not wildly commercial) fave."

-Dennis Harvey, Variety

"Shotgun Players' world premiere of *Beowulf: A Thousand Years of Baggage* is a breath of fresh air, both in terms of reclaiming the adventure from being strictly the province of scholars and as the most thoroughly enjoyable theatrical display I've seen yet this year....It's tempting to call it a

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rock opera in terms of its raucous energy, but Dave Malloy's music leans more toward enthrallingly bouncy cabaret numbers with some jazz, a little calypso and rockabilly, and a whole lot of Kurt Weill....Beowulf's entrance is a masterpiece of bravado, boasting lunkishly in his dazzling song to "Mr. King Hrothgar, sir" that not only will he kill Grendel, but "I will shit on his back and piss on his ankle." Meanwhile the warriors gyrate on hands and knees chanting, "Horses and swords, oh my my my." At this point my jotted-down notes say, "That was fucking awesome."

A good deal of that awesomeness comes from the music, an impressive follow-up to Malloy's memorable score for Ten Red Hen's Clown Bible last year. Beowulf is packed with glee-enducing songs from the super-catchy "Welcome to our mead hall Heorot" to Grendel's mom's particularly Weillesque lament, to Beowulf's bouncy "I Ripped Him Up Good."...This is epic storytelling, and the way it's presented needn't be high-tech but it does need to be larger than life. That's where Beowulf succeeds magnificently."

-Sam Hurwitt, East Bay Express (original review)

"1. Beowulf: A Thousand Years of Baggage, Shotgun Players. This commissioned collaboration with New York's Banana Bag & Bodice transformed the Old English epic poem into a brawny and raucous musical with flamboyant theatricality, wrestling matches, go-go dancing warriors, and a jargon-spouting academic panel that turned into monsters. It also shared a vital component with last year's top pick, Ten Red Hen's Clown Bible: the fiendishly clever, cabaret-infused music and songwriting of Dave Malloy."

-Sam Hurwitt, East Bay Express (Best of 2008)

"Banana Bag and Bodice's brilliantly funny, muscular, and plain irresistible "songplay" is like the Bay Area landing of some marauding East Coast tribe of masterful miscreants. Actually, that's exactly what it is...a vibrant collaborative venture — featuring the formidable talents and instincts of writer-performer Jason Craig, composer-performer Dave Malloy, director Rod Hipskind, and a deft cast of actors and musicians — playing at the very top of its game. Intellectual posturing and epic adventuring, baroque phrases and broken heads, severe looks and severed limbs — it's all an enthralling, time-compressing mishmash of art and violence. The gore of now and yore unfolds to heart-thumping beats, killer lyrics, deadpan cracked-pate humor, and lilting '40s harmonies."

-Robert Avila, SF Bay Guardian

"Beowulf: A Thousand Years of Baggage provides the ideal antidote to anyone who ever had to suffer through stultifying lessons on "Beowulf and the Anglo-Saxon Tradition" in school...the group's gut-gripping new rock opera rages with an anarchic energy reminiscent of the most ardent anthems by Queen or Siouxsie and the Banshees....Beowulf and his merry band rock out to Malloy's defiantly cacophonous musical score, which seamlessly blends an array of influences including Kurt Weill, klezmer, and the Clash."

-Chloe Veltman, SF Weekly

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"Old English epic meets jazzy art-rock and the zany theatricality of Banana Bag & Bodice in this exhilaratingly eclectic and comic Banana-Shotgun Players world premiere, a two-hour creative deconstruction and celebration of the oft-adapted ancient poem as written by Jason Craig (who plays Beowulf) with a terrific, eclectic score by bandleader and performer Dave Malloy...theatrical verve as provocative as it is entertaining, with a score that draws on everything from blues and country to haunting echoes of Kurt Weill and Weimar cabaret - the rock rhythms subconsciously evoking the alliterative beats of the ancient epic."

-Robert Hurwitt, SF Chronicle

"Beowulf: A Thousand Years of Baggage is original, surprising and strangely moving...a hurdy-gurdy rock musical that lives just on the other side of a Brecht-Weill beer hall. Malloy's engaging score is, like the show itself, both funny and serious. And unlike so many new musicals, it features music you actively want to listen to...Part of what makes Beowulf so exciting is that it feels contemporary without straining itself to be hip. The aim seems to be the telling of a story and not the marketing of a performance art rock musical and all the wondrous personalities within it. There's a natural ferocity, humor and thoughtfulness in this show, and that's truly what makes this Beowulf howl."

-Chad Jones, Theater Dogs

"...perhaps the most wildly anticipated theatrical collaboration of the season"

-Nicole Gluckstern, SF Bay Guardian