

Odysseus & Penelope: A Fresh Take on the Classic Epic

Sara Snyder

Many of us remember Homer's *The Odyssey* as required reading in high school. But even if you're not fully acquainted with the story, Evil Eye Productions' *Odysseus & Penelope* provides an original rendition of this epic tale in an inventive light. *Odysseus & Penelope* takes the audience on a daring journey of whirlwind adventure and romance, written by playwright Logan Beutel. Beutel plays Odysseus, while Shalini Patel portrays Penelope, both of whom do justice to the complexity and depth of their characters. Director Megan Muscato brings Beutel's vision to life with an innovative approach that makes Homer's tale captivating to audiences.

Walking into the Addison Performing Arts Centre's Studio Theatre, I took note of how intimate the space was, which proved ideally suited for this piece. I immediately heard the live band playing, which continued to play an original score throughout the show. The live music added energy and excitement to the performance, accenting the beats and emotional intensity of the story, as featured during the numerous battle scenes. The band also added sound effects, like when Odysseus's crew is rowing the ship; a percussion instrument provided the sound of the moving water, adding to the atmosphere of the scenes.

Dancing is a central element of the play, choreographed skillfully by Skylar Duvall, which effectively brought the story to life and was beautifully carried out by the actors. Beutel and Patel are especially captivating in their intimate dance sequences, exuding passion for each other through dance, showing the chemistry between the actors. The choreography was integral to the dramatic effect of the performances. Still, I felt there was at least one missed opportunity to add additional dialogue to the script that would have deepened a particularly emotional moment in the story.

The staging made effective use of the minimal set and helped maintain the show's pace, with almost every scene in constant motion. The actors cleverly executed the quick costume changes, allowing the audience to follow the actors as they transitioned into different characters at an often rapid pace. The use of shadows was inventive, particularly in the portrayal of the Cyclops, which had the entire audience laughing. Humor was interspersed throughout the play, bringing levity to parts of the dramatic story.

One thought that occurred to me was the challenge of representing the passage of time throughout the play, a crucial plot point. It might not be practical or even desirable for the actors to rush to put on old-age makeup in the wings. Still, I felt that the performance would have benefited from a creative way to establish the 20-year time jump beyond the acting choices, making the latter part of the play more heartbreaking and impactful.

Among the impressive performances by Logan Beutel and Shalini Patel, one standout was Jaylon Roy Richburg's portrayal of Antinous. This complicated and riveting character

offered Richburg the chance to shine as an actor, bringing nuance and intensity to the character. Also, Harper Caroline Lee, who did an excellent job playing Odysseus's mother, gave a captivating performance as the wicked Circe, making it hard for me to take my eyes off her.

Odysseus & Penelope is Beutel's brainchild and his first work, which has been in development for years. This production is the second iteration and performance of the play, this time featuring significant changes, such as altering the approach to Penelope's character arc. Evil Eye Productions was brought about by graduates of SMU's Meadows School of the Arts, with Beutel and Muscato both being alums.

This production highlights the importance of experimentation in theatre, fusing different art forms like dance, prose, puppetry, and music to bring an original vision to life. Between the script, choreography, actors' performances, and the live band playing the original score, *Odysseus & Penelope* is invigorating to watch. The retelling of Homer's epic story was well-executed, helping me understand the value of the text I read so long ago, and making the story feel new and accessible. Audiences will appreciate the immense amount of effort the cast and crew put into this performance, finding an exciting perspective on the classic masterpiece.

I look forward to seeing what Evil Eye Productions will be bringing to the stage in the future.

Odysseus & Penelope plays at The Addison Performing Arts Centre's Studio through July 26th.