

'Sea' legs: MU premiere presses line between play, epic poetry



VIVIAN ABAGIU/Tribune

Cast members of the play “The Orphan Sea” rehearse Monday at the University of Missouri, which is performing the play’s world premiere.

By **AMY WILDER**

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The epic poetry and choruses of ancient Greece come together with a distinctly new-world aesthetic and electronic media in the University of Missouri’s world premiere of “The Orphan Sea,” a piece commissioned by the theater department from internationally known playwright Caridad Svich.

The full-length production is an open, fluid, poetic work that features choruses of actors voicing an epic that draws on archetypes and dreams. The story is loosely framed through Greek figures Odysseus and Penelope; the former's ten-year journey, battling monsters to return to his faithful wife after the Trojan War, is the stuff of Homer's "Odyssey." Svich is not rewriting the "Odyssey;" she is bringing the metaphors and archetypes of the present to life through familiar guises.



PHOTO: Cast members of the play "The Orphan Sea" rehea... **more** [+]

Kevin Brown, professor of theater at MU, is a longtime fan of Svich's plays. He became acquainted with her through email in preparation for a conference last year and asked whether she would be willing to talk to his graduate students. Svich Skyped with Brown's students, and afterward he suggested collaborating in the future.

"My interests are in the digital media and performance studies realms," Brown said.

At first, he wanted to produce Svich's work "Iphigenia Crash Land Falls on the Neon Shell That Was Once Her Heart: a Rave Fable," another play at the intersection of ancient Greece and the digital revolution. The collaboration evolved, and Svich agreed to write a new play. Brown applied for a grant from the Missouri Arts Council, and later, "we received a Chancellor's Distinguished Visitor Award, ... so through that support we were able to fly her out."

The actors in the play perform in choruses that represent interactions and ideas: "The One Who Searches for the Lover Long Gone," "Odysseus Chorus" and "Penelope Chorus." The stage directions are spare and open-ended.

"It's very fluid, and it's also very intimidating as a director," said Brown with a laugh.

Similar in visual style to the theater of ancient Greece, which often featured one solo actor and a chorus in a circular space surrounded by the audience, "The Orphan Sea" will be presented fairly minimally — with a giant wraparound projection screen that will "actually go a little bit more than 180 degrees around the audience, so it's a pretty immersive experience," Brown said.

For much of the show, the projections will work as scenery, but there are some videography and manipulated audio elements throughout.

The themes of the play draw from the mythical Greek figures, as well as relationships, origins, migration and return. It is an epic in its own right, written as a poem. Svich has always written poetry but saw poetry and playwriting as separate facets of herself until several years ago, when, while attending the Hedgebrook writing residency, a colleague suggested she merge the two. The form imparts the lure of mystery for the audience.

"Everybody has a different lens into the work, and I'm fine with that," Svich said.

"I think that's what theater is," she added. "I think it's deadly boring to go to a play when everybody comes out with the same idea about it. I think some plays do want to say, 'This is my message.' That's one valid way to approach

dramaturgy, but I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in audiences having an experience — and it's collective because they're in the same room together. ... But they're also having individual experiences within that.”

A test of impact for Svich is the sort of conversations and comparisons that happen among audience members when they've been truly touched by a dramatic work.

“A play cannot exist without the audience. ... There are gaps — and I'm really interested in those gaps between us and among us and how we bridge them — then that becomes what we're all in,” she said. “We are always audience in society.”

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