

Chicago Tribune

Betawulf` Is A Monstrously Goofy Spoof

December 11, 1986 | By Richard Christiansen, Entertainment editor.



``Betawulf,`` which opened Wednesday night, is the Organic Theater`s fantasy-feminist-kung fu-No Nukes-Road Warrior-Wizard of Oz-Chicago Bears version of ``Beowulf.``

It`s not quite as indigestible as it sounds. In fact, if you go along with its seriocomic strip shenanigans, you can have a reasonably good time with it.

The piece, played without intermission, is the concept of Thomas Riccio, the Organic`s artistic director, who has loaded the theater`s large open spaces with imaginative atmospherics in a post-nuclear-holocaust retelling of the ancient epic.

Ragamuffin mutants, survivors of the great ``blast and flash`` in Chi(cago) town, roam the performance area. Grendel, the monster who terrorizes these primitives, is a gross military officer who enters the arena singing

``My Kind of Town.`` Betawulf, the member of the Det(roit) tribe who comes to the rescue, is a kind of Mad Maxine, accompanied by cheerleading Betawulfettes. (``Ain`t no mountain high enough, ain`t no valley low enough,`` they crow.) The second monster Betawulf encounters is Grendel`s mother, a howling woman dressed in stylish `50s fashion. When Betawulf defeats the harridan, she plucks a red shoe from the slain female`s foot and displays it as a symbol of victory. Later, at the boogaloo tribal celebration, Betawulf receives a pair of football helmets as prizes.

The third and final monster whom Betawulf kills is a giant missile weapon, guarded by a white-coated gang of bright-eyed automatons and surrounded by knotted ribbons of computer tape.

With a lot of help from the show`s designers, Riccio and his 33 actors have created a swirling scene of futuristic kitsch for their ``Betawulf.``

Claudia Boddy`s costumes, in particular, are great trash can creations, using ski boots, sneakers, jump suits, sweat shirts and odd bits of tubing and rope to put together a collection of beast-man primitives.

None of the actors speak any dialogue, except for an occasional pitiful yelp of ``Hiroshima`` from the Chis or a lustful growl of ``Giselle McKenzie`` from the slobby Grendel.

Instead, there is a female voice intoning narration that mixes medieval and computer language (Betawulf is hailed as ``a prime time warrior``), and an inventive score, composed by Steve Young, that uses a French horn, oil and bongo drums, a fiddle, a penny whistle, xylophone and assorted other clanging instruments played by roving musicians.

Riccio has cleverly deployed the action throughout the Organic`s hangarlike auditorium. The actors emote in the rafters, sing religious chants from the back of the bleachers, clamber up scrap metal totems and swagger down an entrance ramp bathed in a blood red light. Huge sheets of plastic form the rough waves under which Betawulf and Grendel`s mother battle; gently undulating sheets of gauze serve as the sea Betawulf navigates in order to reach Chi town.

Try not to take it all too seriously, and the whole thing can be as much fun as a Saturday matinee (when, by the way, children are admitted at reduced prices).

``BETAWULF``

A new play conceived and directed by Thomas Riccio and written by Lisa Barnes, Ray Miller, Robert Hostetter, Riccio and Blair Thomas. Set by Michael K. Paxton, Watt King and David Tennenbaum, costumes by Claudia Boddy, lighting by Peter Gottlieb, properties by Shelley Krevitt, music by Steve Hunt. Opened Dec. 10 at

the Organic Theater, 3319 N. Clark St., and plays at 8 p.m. Thursday and Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday and 7 p.m. Sunday, through Jan. 11. Length of performance, 1:25. Tickets are \$5 and \$10, with discounts for students, senior citizens, groups and children ages 6 to 12. Phone 327-5507.

THE CAST

Gregory Allen, Rengin Altay, Lisa Barnes, Billy Bermingham, Sarah Bradley, Kim Crawford, Richard Duslack, Bill Green, Nancy Heap, Victoria Herd, Annette Hillman, George Johnston, Brooke Karzen, Lucina Kathmann, Margaret Kemp, Brian David Klatt, Christopher Kubasik, Russell Kuzuhara, Judy Lejeck, Franette Liebow, Adam Menken, Brad Miller, Dusty Preslar-Traum, Melodie Ranstrom, Aliza Shalowitz, Karen Sheridan, Julia Smith, Blair Thomas, Cherise Thurman, Joel Van Liew, David Van Matre, Maria Weidemann, Ed Wheeler.